

Aruna, the protagonist of the novel is an educated financially independent middle class woman in modern society. Suppressed at her parental home, she seeks her freedom in her eloped marriage with Prakasam. However, Aruna soon becomes disillusioned. Her new found happiness can come only at a price. That of relinquishing her individuality. Her space and body become a casualty. One of the most controversial novels of its time, *Sveccha*, through its portrayal of Aruna, brings for the first time a feminist perspective to Telugu literary discourse. Taking up their common place issues that confront woman in everyday life, the novel takes a hard look at the reality of freedom that women enjoy in modern society. A significant novel from modern Telugu literature.

Volga (Popuri Lalitha Kumar - b. 1950) is credited with introducing a feminist perspective into the literacy political discourse of Andhra Pradesh. An activist for the cause of women and a sensitive writer, Volga's major novels include *Manavi*, *Sahaja*, *Kanneeti Keratala Vennela*, *Akasham to Sagam* and *Gulabila*. Short story collections include *Rajakiya Kathalu* and *Prayogam*. Besides, Volga has translated many important texts into Telugu and has edited an anthology of poetry titled *Neeli Meghalu*.

Ari Sitaramayya is a distinguished translator. He is presently a Professor at the Department of Bio Medical Sciences, Oakland University, USA.



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VOLGA

A QUEST FOR FREEDOM

Translated by
Ari Sitaramayya

Adan Pradan

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ARI SITARAMAYYA



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Foreword

"Freedom is the recognition of necessity"

-Engels

"An investigation into the guiding principles of our lives or of the society around us is this necessity. And recognizing this necessity is swecccha (Freedom). During the investigation phase—as the heroine of this novel finds out—one faces inner conflicts as well as external struggles. However, once the necessity for swecccha is recognized, that is, after the person becomes free, the struggles will remain, but the inner conflicts will have been left behind."

-C.V. Subba Rao

When *Sveccha* first appeared in the magazine *catura*, my dear friend Subba Rao expressed his eagerness to write a foreword to it when it was published as a novel. It is a great tragedy that he didn't live to see its publication. All I can do now is quote his thoughts from his letters. One of the topics he and I loved to talk about was *life after freedom*, probably because we both went through so many trials and tribulations in our lives. Having promised several times that his foreword would distill the essence of all of our conversations, he disappeared without a trace! Now I find myself so inadequate filling his shoes.

It has been seven years since *Sveccha* first appeared in *Catura* (February 1987). During these seven years there was not another novel that was discussed as much or as controversial. All through the first year after its publication, readers, literary enthusiasts and leftists of all shades

all over Andhra Pradesh were engaged in wide-ranging discussions about *sveccha*. These discussions gradually left the literary space and invaded my personal life. However, in spite of the pain caused, they left me with invaluable, cherished experiences. I have learnt many precious lessons about friendship, love, hatred, literature, life, politics, women's groups and women helping women. I have stood my ground as an individual with strong, definite ideas. That I have such innate power to stand strong is a lesson I learnt, thanks to this novel.

I think *sveccha* became so controversial as a novel because of the historical conditions of the day. Feminist ideas were just beginning to be propagated. Such ideas were not a cause for alarm as long as they remained mere topics for discussion, but *sveccha* presented them as real life issues, as issues related to families, and discussed them as problems faced by an average, middle-class, family woman. People couldn't help taking a peek into their own lives. A woman who was no different from their daughters, sisters and wives now asked the questions they had been avoiding and brushing aside. They felt uncomfortable. What if this novel empowered the women in their lives to ask questions they had not asked before? The novel created quite a stir because it questioned the meaning and purpose of the lives of many women who were educated and employed, but remained suppressed directly or indirectly, both within their families and in the society at large.

Some didn't like the very word *sveccha*. To them it signified boundless freedom, irresponsible freedom. "To what ends is this freedom? What do you hope to gain advocating such freedom?" I was asked. It appears that not many have thought about the meaning of *sveccha*. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—was the slogan of the French revolution. The three parts of this slogan are independent entities, but they are sequential. Many don't seem to realize the difference between Liberty and Equality. There are those who believe that if Equality is achieved, Freedom

(used henceforth as synonym for Liberty) will follow. One can achieve Freedom without achieving Equality, but Equality without Freedom is meaningless. It will not last. To remove inequalities in society, and to build a mutually supportive environment with equal rights and opportunities for all people, the first thing to achieve is Freedom. Freedom is not something we can get from somebody nor can somebody offer it to us. Freedom is the recognition of our needs and what is most essential for our existence. This is not easy to achieve. What we are talking about is Freedom from ourselves, from the traditions, opinions and thoughts we grew up with. Freedom from seemingly unshakeable beliefs. When social changes become inevitable, the desire for Freedom springs up in people. Those who ask questions about society, their existence in society, their relationship with society, and the oppressive nature of this relationship, and seek answers to such questions, travel the road to Freedom. They will face many struggles in their lives, but they will not have to deal with inner conflicts. Using Aruna's life as an example, I have described in this novel the process of getting past the stage of inner conflicts. Towards the end of the novel, Aruna passes through this agonizing phase, and is prepared for the struggles ahead. If we do not understand the concept of Freedom, do not realize it and enjoy it, the struggles we engage in are meaningless. Without Freedom, the inequalities we think we are fighting will reappear in another guise. Every person should achieve Freedom—Freedom impervious to the control and authority of any person or any quarter. In the quest for Freedom, one understands that such Freedom should not become detrimental to others. Those who are not free cannot appreciate such responsibility. A person who achieves Freedom becomes responsible for herself and for the society. One with Freedom understands that it always comes with responsibility, and that, conversely, lack of responsibility reflects slavery to one thing or the other. Women who do not question the

roles imposed upon them by the society, who do not question the effects of such roles on their existence, who remain oblivious to how meaningless their lives have become, lead irresponsible lives. Women who think that they are born just to get married, that they get married just to serve their husbands by cooking for them and raising their children, that there is no better goal for them than that, that their peace is tied to preserving the peace of the family, are leading irresponsible lives. These women are interested neither in their own lives nor in the society. Even the men who say that the society should be reformed strongly believe that it is they who will bring about the change and that it will be sufficient for the women to assist them when needed while taking care of the families. The real danger for the patriarchal society is when women realize that what needs to be changed is their own lives and the attitudes of men towards them.

Those who do not understand their responsibilities to themselves and to the society cannot desire Freedom. Some have a serious problem with the concept of these responsibilities. As I said above, some women will argue that getting married and raising children is, in and of itself, their responsibility. We should ask if this responsibility is a chosen one or one imposed upon the women by the patriarchal society. If we search for answers to this question, we will understand the very foundations of the patriarchal society. We will understand the methods of oppression of women and their history. We will enter the realm of the politics of reproductive rights. We come to the arena of control, power, and sexual relationships in the family. We will come to realize that sexuality and reproductive roles have controlled the lives of women and woven a social structure around them. Once we realize this, it becomes clear that wife, mother, prostitute etc are roles imposed upon us, not responsibilities chosen. We will cherish the Freedom to choose for ourselves what we want to be. For most women the realization that traditional roles

were imposed upon them comes through personal experiences—of suffocating oppression and experiences of violence that threaten their very existence. Their lives become mired in distress. When these women strongly desire to understand the social mechanisms that control their lives, then we see the first indications of their quest for Freedom. There has always been, and there will always be, a struggle between such individuals desiring Freedom and the traditional societal controls. This struggle is more intense in the case of women, but it is a worthy struggle. This struggle is very essential for the democratic transformation of the society and for individuals to lead happier lives. There will never be a mechanism acceptable to everyone. Feminism is unique in its politicization of the struggle between individual rights and what were hitherto prescribed as the responsibilities of women.

Aruna of this novel is a middle class, modern woman. Women like her are getting educated. They are finding employment in various fields and considering themselves independent. The recognition they receive in education and employment, the positions they reach by rising through the ranks, the wisdom to think independently and the self respect they accrue, and the opportunity for various social relationships, awaken them. These experiences change their nature and their attitude towards life. These women begin to think in non-traditional ways about family and its power structure. This is the beginning of an investigation, a challenge to the traditional ideology imposed upon them. Such challenges to the established ideology inevitably erupt in struggles both at the individual and societal level. The obedient, subordinate woman of the home is expected to be transformed into a courageous, skillful, determined, goal-oriented, intelligent and responsible person at her work. A woman who has learnt to behave responsibly and intelligently at work will inevitably bring her skills home. She will courageously raise questions at home. Therein lies the problem. During the last fifty years or so, the number

of women entering the social and economic arenas has steadily increased. New jobs and new responsibilities are continually being thrust upon them. However, they have not been relieved of even a single responsibility from the past. Burdened by these unprecedented responsibilities, women are looking for new ways to lighten their burden. Some self-confident women are directing their attention at the society. This novel has successfully captured, at least to some extent, the inner conflicts faced by these new women and the struggles they wage.

Aruna recognizes right from her childhood that she is being suppressed. She tries to get out of it. One of her attempts lands her back in the rut. She thinks at first that escaping from the control of her father and maternal aunt and gaining economic independence will make life happier. She accomplishes both. However, it takes her only two months to realize that the Freedom she thought she gained through marriage to Prakasam is an illusion. She becomes pregnant and he does not allow her to get an abortion. The authority he exhibits in denying her wish distresses her deeply.

Aruna learns that her principal responsibility is motherhood. That she has a job, and that she has relationships in the external world are irrelevant. She also learns that she has no right to her own earnings. She learns that she cannot interact with the society as a person, independent of her family. If she were to ignore these, bring a paycheck home and give it to her husband, give birth to children, look after their needs and education, and make sure the needs of everybody in the family were met, her life would be "peaceful." Prakasam would be a good husband. However, the moment Aruna recognizes that she is an individual, that she has her own interests, hobbies and talents, that she has the desire to test and prove herself, and that such activities are essential to her growth as an individual, the peace of her family is shattered. We understand two things from this: first, the family denies the woman her

individual space; second, it is only after destroying her individuality that the family remains peaceful and stable. The family gains strength and stability as it continues its destructive march against individuality. Aruna leaves her family only after gaining a measure of understanding of this process.

The novel treats such serious issues as things that commonly occur in middle class families. It brought to the surface atrocities that do not outwardly look terrible, that remain hidden, that have become habitual, and are even afforded legal and moral sanction. This proved to be unbearable to some. Some were seriously perturbed at their prospects if women were to leave such good husbands like Prakasam. They wondered what would happen to the institution of family if women leave it desiring interaction with the society.

Aruna faces struggles outside the family also. She questions the attitudes towards women in organizations that are apparently dedicated to raising social awareness. She leaves an organization that recognized her not as an individual but as the wife of so and so, and tries to counsel her of the importance of remaining a wife. This incident became a problem for men in political parties. The position of women even in leftist political parties is debatable. Women working in revolutionary movements and organizations have also suffered the authority, power and opposition of men. Political parties have adapted a political "family" ideology that women wishing to work with them should be "good women", "good family women", women upholding the "family honor", and women who will not ruin their "respectability" in society. Having exposed this attitude, *sweccha* became a thorn in their side. Even people who have often changed political parties and ideologies argued that Aruna is an individualist because she left the organization she had worked for, and put the novel down characterizing it as an advocate of individualism. To those who claim that they had left politics due to differences in

ideology and that Aruna had left her organization on a simple personal difference—let me remind them that individualism is politics, too. They should recognize that Aruna behaved just like them in that she left an organization she did not like, and that she thought of building an organization where women also could aspire for positions and authority. Such recognition from them is unlikely because that would be an admission of their treatment of women. The very fact that discussions have continued over the last seven years on the questions raised in *sweccha* about position of women in political parties is in itself a testament to the validity of the questions raised.

In summary, narrating the experiences of women in the family and in politics from their perspective and suggesting that the lessons of these experiences should be understood in a new light was the strength of this novel. It was also the reason why it was opposed by defenders of male authority.

Uma, one of the characters in this novel, decides not to get married, but to live in a new understanding with the man she loves. In fact, characters that spurned marriage for fear of losing Freedom are not new to Telugu literature. Kasturi in '*Neekaem Kaavaali*' and Sundaram in *Endamaavulu*, two of Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao's novels, are such examples. But these characters were of people who remained outside the family structure; they were prostitutes. That was probably why these characters didn't agitate many. Is not the institution of family more secure if prostitutes don't marry? Maybe readers who admired Kodavatiganti did not think of the possibility that family women might idealize Kasturi and Sundaram and fancy relationships with men without formal marriages. Uma in this novel, from a good family, and well-educated, stirred a lot of anxiety among the readers by choosing love but not family. It raised the question: what about children? That question kept popping up until the story "*Prayogam*" was written. Some poor arguments were also advanced—that

if a man is not tied down in family, he will produce a child with a woman here and another with a woman there and eventually leave a lot of women raising his offspring. That such men are around and that they are leaving innocent women in misery is one thing. But the very suggestion of these critics that given a chance men will behave at this despicable level is telling! Will they? This question should be put to these critics. Ignoring the irresponsibility of men, and leaving the burden of raising children entirely on women as if it is their job, is nothing but a defense of the male preserve.

Having chosen not to get married, an independent, responsible, educated woman, enters into a relationship with a man only after considerable observation and understanding. Such a woman has sufficient intelligence to think about children, and the courage and intimacy to discuss with the man the shared responsibility of raising children. The critics seem to look at all women as weak and foolish: women who innocently fall for the pretenses of men, who depend upon the false promises of marriage and others who raise children of uncaring men, are treated no differently than women who think carefully about their lives, make educated choices about love and raising children. It makes no sense for critics to shower such "concern" on women who think and plan carefully about raising a child while there are so many women who have no idea what a responsibility it is to raise a child, no idea how much effort it takes to raise one, and no say in becoming pregnant. Do not these critics hope that every woman should become intelligent enough, and strong enough to make decisions related to her own life? Innocent women who get cheated provide great opportunities to write heartbreaking stories. Characters like Uma provide them a different kind of opportunity—for scare mongering. In truth, there is no real reason for their fears but the natural resistance to any new idea. Also, these discussions and criticisms are for the most part academic. There will

always be women who recognize that the restrictions imposed upon them by the society are detrimental to their progress. They will struggle throughout their lives trying desperately to play the roles expected of them. From these struggles, they will come up with new ideas and try putting them to test, outside the realm of academic discussions. As Simone de Beauvoir said, rationalizations for our lifestyles should be based on a sound knowledge of our living conditions. This novel will have served its intended purpose if it helps those women who desire such knowledge, even a little bit in understanding their living conditions.

Another question often asked by many is—what solutions does this novel provide for Aruna, Uma or other women like them? In fact, asking writers for solutions to problems, that too solutions which are perfect and fool-proof, or even searching for such solutions in book is unwise. Kodavantiganti Kutumba Rao advised long ago not to look in books for such solutions. Leaving that aside, it is not easy to find solutions to what are considered personal problems but which are, in fact, issues related to reproductive rights of women. A writer can create a character who is able to intelligently and effectively solve her problems. However, that does not mean that her methods will be equally applicable or useful to other women. For a person dedicated to writing about Freedom, sexuality and reproductive rights of women, the responsibility lies not in finding solutions to problems of individual women, but in demonstrating that these issues are not personal, and in proving to the society that these issues need to be considered as societal problems requiring society-wide resolutions. The strengths and successes of feminist writers will be measured by how well they do this job. The novel *sveccha* is an effort in this direction.

-Volga

Introduction

Telugu, spoken by nearly 80 million people has a long literary history. But the extant literature dates back to only the eleventh century A.D. The first acknowledged literary work in Telugu is Andhra Mahabharatam. Nannaya rendered the first two *Parvas* (sections) and a part of the third *parva* into Telugu. In the thirteenth century Tikkana rendered the remaining fifteen *parvas* of Mahabharata into Telugu. It was only in the fourteenth century that the complete Mahabharata was available in Telugu, when Yerrapregada completed the unfinished task of Nannaya. These three poets, though eminent for their other works, are popularly known as Kavitraya or the poets trio.

Since religion had an important place in daily life, most of the early literary works in Telugu dealt with the various sects of Hinduism like Saivism, Veerasaivism and Vaishnavism. Almost all important epics existing in Sanskrit were rendered into Telugu. But they were not mere translations. Following the prevalent literary norms poets almost recreated new epics with a fair play of their creativity.

After the era of Puranas, Prabandha era gave birth to many poetic works encompassing eighteen types of descriptions, nine types of emotions and thirty-six figures of speech as per existing tradition. In the fifteenth century Srinatha's *Sringara Naishadham* and Potana's *Bhagavatam* had universal appeal. In the sixteenth century, especially during the rule of Sri Krishnadevaraya, there were eight important court poets known as *Ashtadiggajas* (elephants

supporting the eight corners of the earth) who created great poetic works and Sri Krishnadevaraya's own work, *Amuktamalyada* is counted among the best works of the period. During the seventeenth century poets like Vemana wrote in people's language reflecting day to day life and teaching universal truths.

During the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries in Madurai and Tanjavur literature flourished due to patronage of the kings. Many kings themselves were poets and wrote epics. This period also witnessed many women writers. Even as long ago as in the fifteenth century Tallapaka Thimmakka wrote *Subhadrarjuniyam* (The story of Subhadra and Arjuna). Her husband Tallapaka Annamacharya was well known for devotional songs which are still popular making Annamayya a household name. In the sixteenth century Aatukuri Molla wrote Ramayana mixing prose and poetry which is praised for its direct appeal and simple style. Since her father was a potter, she is also known as Kummari (potter) Molla.

In the eighteenth century western scholars began showing considerable interest in Indian literature and took up research and study. Scholars like William Brown and Charles Philip Brown contributed immensely to Telugu language and literature through research studies and by collecting and conserving the literature that was almost lost. For the first time a Telugu dictionary was published. Vemana's poems too appeared in English.

In the nineteenth century Kandukuri Viresalingam (1847-1919) heralded the modern era in Telugu literature. He gave Telugu its first novel *Rajasekhara Charitamu* in 1880. For the first time Telugu literary history was written in the form of *Telugu Kavulu* (Telugu poets). His *Sweeya Charitamu* was the first autobiography in Telugu. Thus he made a beginning in every modern genre of Telugu literature. Since Viresalingam was a social reformer at heart he used his writings and the magazines he edited for promoting social cause.

During this period Gidugu Venkataramamurthy started a movement for use of colloquial language in literature with a view to bringing literature to common people. Many did not appreciate this revolutionary change. Nevertheless, a beginning was made and the trend gradually gained momentum and was widely accepted.

The twentieth century was yet another turning point in Telugu literature. The influence of western literature and the use of colloquial language brought about varied changes to the form and theme of poetry. It shed its conventional style marked by grandeur and began to explore and experiment giving way to brevity and simplicity. Poets like Gurajada Apparao, Rayaprolu Subba Rao pioneered this new movement in poetry.

The lyric poetry that emerged during this time gave expression to patriotism, didacticism and love for nature. Deviating from the old classical metres poets began to compose in new and simple metres. Poets like Gurajada Apparao, Nanduri Subba Rao, Basavaraju Apparao, Adavi Bapiraju and Devulapalli Krishna Sastry continued to cast a spell on the readers.

The 1920s and 1930s added another dimension to poetry. Influenced by literary trends prevalent in the West like imagism, impressionism, realism, surrealism and a host of other 'isms', poets changed their poetic expression.

Some poets looked to the then Soviet Union for inspiration. Thus Abhudaya Kavittvam (progressive poetry) as a school was born. Many poets became part of this movement. Of these Srirangam Srinivasa Rao (Sri Sri) is regarded as a pioneer. Soon progressive poetry became revolutionary poetry and Sri Sri had a legion of followers.

Though the twentieth century witnessed many changes in Telugu literature which was swept by many trends prevalent in the contemporary world, Viswanatha Satyanarayana stood out as classicist in practice and precept. He handled every genre with great dexterity and ease without ever climbing down from the heights he had fixed

for himself. His *Ramayana Kalpavriksham* won Bharatiya Jnanpith Award, the most prestigious literary award in India. His novel, *Veyipadagalu* (Thousand Hoods), a classic in its nature and treatment, proved to be a great literary feat with its unwieldy theme, plot and subplots and innumerable characters, all with flesh and blood and clear cut delineation.

New schools of thought emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. There were already progressive and revolutionary writers. Now in order to depict the filth in the society and to express their anger, disgust and hatred Digambara Kavulu (naked poets) chose the language of their poetic expression in the same vein which drew the attention of the readers to startling realities.

Though the novels and short stories did not reflect as many schools, ideologies and experiments as in poetry in theme, form and techniques undoubtedly many sweeping changes set in. The stream of consciousness, psycho-analysis, the studies of Jung and Freud did influence short story writers and novelists. Kodavatiganti Kutumbarao, Buchchi Babu, Gopichand, G.V. Krishnarao, Rachakonda Viswanatha Sastri and others experimented with language, expression and characterization. They fine crafted the technique of novel.

Gudipati Venkatachalam proved himself to be different from his contemporaries looking ahead of his times and paying attention to such aspects of society which others normally refuse to acknowledge. He recognized the disadvantage the women have in tradition-bound family life and society. Their exploitation, lack of freedom in love and marriage too were brought into focus. His writings disturbed conventional society which was not ready to recognize and discuss intimate problems of individuals and families. Some even stamped Chalam's novels as obscene and many feared to admit reading them.

In the meantime Telugu short story too evolved along with the novel and got recognition at international level.

Many novelists were also well known short story writers.

The sixties and the seventies of the twentieth century witnessed a spurt of women's writings because of widespread education, growth in publishing opportunities and increase in number of newspapers and magazines that catered to the readers' craving for, particularly short stories.

Women writers outnumbered men especially in the genre of novel. Writings took shape with an eye for detail and form from the woman's point of view. Most of them centered around family life, human relations, love, marriage, dowry and women's employment. These stories and novels threw up new thinking women and their adjustment to modern living.

There also appeared a large number of stories with entertainment as their main goal. Love, romance, superstitions, mysteries, blackmagic came handy but no serious literary thought was given to them.

Modern Telugu literature is influenced by various movements from time to time. At time it appeared that movements themselves were determining the course of literature. In the last two decades of the twentieth century Feminism and Dalit movement came to the forefront strongly changing the direction of literature. The world wide developments are also responsible for literature taking a hard stand so different from entertainment, creativity and gentle art of persuasion which vastly directed literature so far. Partly it is due to urgency and intensity of the writers themselves to explore and place the issues before people and partly it is an urge to lend one's voice to the movement questioning society at every level.

To drive home the point writers are not only clashing with the existing society, its norms and traditions but also taking examples from history, puranas, legends and fiction, scrutinizing and analyzing them for strengthening their own argument. Writers like Allam Rajaiah, Raghottama Reddy, Kaluva Mallayya, Kathi Padmarao

and Yendluri Sudhakara Rao are in the forefront of Dalit literature.

Similarly Volga, P. Satyavati, Jayaprabha, Kondepudi Nirmala, Vasantha Kannabiran, Kuppli Padma, Abburi Chayadevi and others are shaping public opinion in favour of feminism through their poems, stories, novels, essays, speeches, discourses and discussions. They are questioning the values of patriarchal society that oppress women. Among them Katyayani Vidmahe and Volga are in the forefront. But in the context of Marxism, Ranganayakamma depicted women's economic problems and oppression in her *Janaki Vimukti* in 1978 itself. This in fact was the beginning of feminist writing in Telugu.

When a collection of poems by feminists, *Neelimeghalu* (Blue Clouds) appeared in 1993, there were immediate reactions. Some approved. Some disapproved. Some understood. Some could change their way of thinking. But there were many who misunderstood the whole concept and misinterpreted it in a derogatory way. In fact the subject of many of these poems was the place of woman in contemporary society like bringing up of a girl child, partiality towards boys, violence in family, dowry deaths, female foeticide, rape. While the treatment of the subject reflected the writer's individual understanding and point of view, yet they all argue for the improvement of the condition of women and for gender equality.

Volga stands out as a leading writer of short stories and novels that reflect a strong feminist ideology. Her *Rajakiya Kathalu*, *Swechcha*, *Manavi* and *Akashamlo Sagam* to mention a few are significant works.

Swechcha was first published in 1987 in *Catura* and was widely discussed for its contents and presentation. Many people could not understand the point of view of the writer. She believes that freedom leads to responsibility towards self and towards society but never makes a person irresponsible. *Swechcha* questions the system which always tries to hold back women in families, politics or move-

ments. This novel suggests that matters which commonly occur in middle class families need to be recognized as social issues and treated as such.

Aruna, the central character in *Swechcha*, a post-graduate, feels oppression first in the family, then in the society around, just because she is a girl. She marries Prakasam hoping he is her perfect match. She defies her family to marry Prakasam. After marriage she is surprised to find him disciplining her in her day to day life. Though she is not ready to become a mother she submits herself to his wishes. She bears a girl child. Prakasam does not feel the shared responsibility of bringing up the child. He does not tolerate independent activities of Aruna whether they are college union activities or some other social activities. He objects to her working for a magazine as a kind of social service. She finds out that even those men who run the magazine are not honest and they have double standards, one for their own home, and another for outside world. At home Prakasam's domineering nature, intolerance and unreasonable behaviour almost suffocates her.

Aruna leaves home, applies for a month's leave and visits her friend in Delhi. She shares her unhappiness with her friend Uma. Uma's independent nature, her love relationship with Sudhir whom she does not marry is something which does not adhere to any social norms. Uma says that they live according to their convenience. That matured judgement seems all right to Aruna. She decides to free herself from family bonds and to help those women who are helpless and oppressed. She thinks that then only her "Swechcha" or freedom acquires some meaning.

Swechcha tries to focus on several problems confronting today's woman like restricting the freedom of a girl child, husband dictating terms to wife and oppressing her, woman lacking freedom to decide when to have children, rape in married life, and laws that decide that children stay with their father when husband and wife are divorced.

The novel also advocates freedom to two adults to have live in relationship without entering into the quagmire of marriage. If we interpret this freedom as "freewill" then everything seems to fall in place.

Readers' thinking has considerably changed from the times *Swechcha* appeared. Now to divorce husband, to live with whom one chooses or to live independently free of family shackles are not such shocking situations. In cities and civilized societies no one gives extraordinary importance to these matters. But having exercised one's freewill, there is no point expecting social acceptance and approval.

Yet there is one major problem that is confronting the society which is doing immense harm to woman's cause. Projection of woman by mass media like advertisements, cinemas, television shows and fashion shows depicting her as an object to be coveted and desired defeat the very purpose of restoring human dignity to woman. The unbelievable life depicted and the false values that are upheld by the media lead to a big question – where is the real woman in these lifestyles and what are the problems addressed. In this adverse climate even literature looks helpless confined to discussion groups and public harangues leave alone creating right atmosphere and right values.

The author of *Swechcha* is very clear about what she wants to say. There is nothing to explain or to justify. Since Volga has incisive words, strength in thought and supporting emotion her honesty reflects in her literature. To that extent, one can say, the purpose of *Swechcha* has been fulfilled.

New Delhi

DR. J. BHAGYALAKSHMI

1

It's almost twelve o' clock.

Aruna kept looking at the clock and the front gate. The house is all quiet. Even the ticking of the clock could be heard loudly and this irritated Aruna.

It is usually very quiet in the house around noon.

Aruna's father, Janakiramayya, and her brother, Gopalrao, leave for their offices by ten o'clock.

Gopalrao's two boys go to school.

Aruna's mother, Sitamma and her sister-in-law, Suseela, finish their lunch early and attend to cleaning lentils, mending clothes and other housework. At noon, they usually sleep.

The children will not return from school until three o' clock.

The house will be quiet till then.

Aruna also does housework, but after lunch, she prefers to lie down and read a book.

Usually Aruna is not at home during the day since she is busy with her college and exams. Now, during these holidays, she has been restless, finding it difficult to stay at home all day.

It has been only ten days since the last day of the M.A. final exams were over, but it already feels like ten months for Aruna. Her friend, Uma, just finished her M. Sc. exams the day before yesterday. She has promised to come today by ten, but it is already twelve and there is no sign of Uma.

Kanakamma, Aruna's paternal aunt, does absolutely no work either at home or outside. Her job is simply to keep an eye on what everybody else is doing and criticise

them at every opportunity she gets.

She has been observing Aruna's restlessness.

"If you have nothing better to do than looking at the clock and the gate, why don't you go up to the terrace and fetch the *vadiyalu** and put them away."

Aruna hates talking to her aunt, let alone arguing with her. If she can do what Kanakamma wants her to do, she does it quietly, but when she can't or doesn't want to, she just pretends that she never heard a word.

Kanakamma gets enraged when Aruna ignores her like that.

But no matter how much of a scene her aunt makes and how much the rest of the family admonishes her, Aruna doesn't open her mouth.

If she doesn't go and get the *vadiyalu* now, Kanakamma won't let up. A long lecture is sure to follow.

She will certainly say how many times she had made *vadiyalu* by the time she was Aruna's age; she is sure to remind Aruna that a girl is no girl unless she makes *vadiyalu*; and she won't forget to mention how disgracefully Aruna is behaving.

All these things will come up in the lecture. And nobody can stop these lectures.

Aruna went up to the terrace. White sarees are spread out on cots and the little *vadiyalu* on the sarees are drying in the sun.

Aruna looked at them for a moment and then folded all the sarees. On her way to the staircase she stopped and looked at the street below.

'Uma is always like this. She never comes on time. It's frustrating to wait for somebody.'

Uma will be leaving town today. If she had come early, they could have spent more time together before she left. Aruna is vexed.

* Savouries made of black gram and green pumpkin, dried and bottled, deep fried before eating.

Kanakamma came to the street side on some errand and looked up at the terrace. She caught Aruna looking at the street and said, "What are you looking at? Why don't you come down when your work is finished? Come down now."

Aruna remembered the day when she had asked her mother, Sitamma, "Why is this aunt living with us?"

Sitamma was very uneasy. "Don't talk like that. If she hears, she will be very upset."

She did hear, and she was indeed upset.

She somehow heard everything no matter who said what and when. And she had an opinion on everything. After passing her comments, she invariably says, "Why should I say anything, who cares about a widow's talk anyway."

She made a big scene that day. She kept grumbling till Janakiramayya came home. Sitamma even begged her to ignore the little girl's question. After all, she was just a little girl.

"I know she is a little girl. Little girls usually say what the elders have in their hearts," snapped Kanakamma.

Sitamma didn't know what to say. Janakiramayya came home. Even before he had washed his feet, Kanakamma started crying very loudly and recounted how badly she had been insulted.

Janakiramayya was outraged. He flew into a rage and beat Aruna. Kanakamma then said, "Don't hit her so hard. If anything happens to her, people will blame me for it. What's the use of blaming the kid anyway. Once a woman becomes a widow and takes shelter under someone's roof, it's inevitable for her to suffer insults."

That night Sitamma and Aruna went to bed crying in each other's arms. Janakiramayya yelled at Sitamma again before going to bed.

Aruna hated Kanakamma ever since. This hatred grew with time. Aruna realised that for some reason both her parents were afraid of this aunt.

It was much later that she came to know why.

Kanakamma had been married very young. Even before they could set up a home, her husband died. Kanakamma was given five acres of wet land in the property settlement, and with it, she came to live with her younger brother. It was the desire for this land that enslaved Janakiramayya. He never allowed Sitamma to react no matter what Kanakamma said to her. Though Aruna was unhappy with it, she knew that her parents would remain subservient to the aunt because of the land.

Kanakamma never had the opportunity to wear a bindi on her forehead, flowers in her hair or to dress up in beautiful clothes. Ever since, she has always been very envious of any woman who looked happy, dressed up or appeared cheerful.

She could not accept the fact of girls' stepping out of the house in the name of school and education. She incessantly talked about stopping the girls from going to school after the third class.

Aruna's older sister, Rajeswari, somehow managed to get through eighth class before succumbing to Kanakamma's tirades.

She was married off two years after that, again because Janakiramayya could not disobey the dictates of his sister.

When Aruna reached eighth class...

"It won't be long before you'll have to stop this roaming around. Marriage will cure all this," said Kanakamma.

"Aruna is not like her sister. She is good at her studies," murmured Janakiramayya mustering all his courage.

The truth of the matter was that Janakiramayya had no money left after building the house. He had debts to pay and was not in a position to contemplate Aruna's marriage.

"Why? What good is this education for her? Aren't you planning to get her married? It hasn't done any good to any woman I know. Education will not help her contract

a better marriage. No woman I know has ever been benefited by education. It is not for a girl who intends to marry and have a family.

"Anyway, why should I bother. You want her to study, and she too wants to study. And her mother doesn't seem to care what is happening to her daughter. But I just wonder, what are we going to do if something happens to her?" She used to say this often.

Kanakamma criticised every step Aruna took. She didn't even spare her gait. "What is that lazy walk? You must walk smartly. How can you ever get anything done if you walk so slowly? I wonder how you're going to feed your husband tomorrow when you get married as if you are afraid of stamping on the ants on the ground?"

And if she walks fast "What is this running? Aren't you a girl? If you don't slow down, how can anyone be inclined to marry you?"

Aruna was hopelessly dispirited during the holidays with the knowledge that Kanakamma was watching her every step and recording everything she did.

Ever since she had finished high school and gone to college, everybody in the house seemed to have caught the disease from Kanakamma.

Somebody or other in the house found something in everything she did objectionable—every breath she took and every step she walked. Even the water she bathed in and the powder she used, was not spared.

Though they did not agree on much else, when it came to controlling Aruna and teaching her proper behaviour, they all seemed to be in total agreement.

Kanakamma used to behave as if her life's mission is to humiliate Aruna.

Aruna still remembered that day.

She was then in her tenth class.

She was returning home from school. Like other girls of her age, she was walking with her books held close against her chest.

Kanakamma was in her usual mood of finding fault with Aruna. She saw the books on Aruna's chest.

"This is what happens when a grown up girl is not married. Isn't it disgraceful to be walking like that with a man's picture on her chest?" started Kanakamma.

Aruna was startled. She dropped the books in horror.

The cover of the book on top had the picture of a film actor. That's it.

The mistake!

Aruna was reeling in anger and shame as she recalled this humiliation, when an auto pulled up at the gate and stopped.

Uma stepped out carrying a big trunk.

As she helped Uma with her trunk. Aruna said, "What happened? You were supposed to come at ten o'clock! I am dying here waiting for you."

"It took me a long time to pack everything. Because I'm not coming back after the holidays, I had to empty the room into this trunk." The thought of separation upset both of them.

"Did you buy your ticket?"

"I got it yesterday. It is for the 9.30 bus tonight."

"Did you eat?"

"Yes, but give me a glass of water."

By then Aruna's mother, sister-in-law and aunt came out to see Uma and surrounded her. Sitamma and Suseela engaged her in pleasantries while Kanakamma examined her from head to toe. She noticed that though tired, Uma radiated excitement, happiness and a delicate beauty. Kanakamma was seized by a feeling of uneasy restlessness.

Aruna brought a glass of water for Uma and both sat down on a cot in the living room. Sitamma, Suseela and Kanakamma quickly joined them. They pretended to be busy peeling off *vadiyalu* from the sarees.

Uma looked at Aruna and smiled. Aruna felt uncomfortable. "So, how did the exams go?" she asked.

"Not bad. All the questions were expected ones. I am

sure of a first class." Uma said nonchalantly.

"First class? I'm not asking about first class, what about the gold medal?"

"I don't know about that. Prem Kumar may snatch it off. Looks like he has been studying very hard. He's been growing a beard and all that."

"If marks could be awarded to beards and moustaches, a lot of people would have grown them."

While they both laughed, Suseela got up, irritated, to go into the other room.

"What kind of talk is this." As Kanakamma was about to start on her lecture, Aruna got up saying, "Let us go out and sit in the verandah."

"Looks like we should not hear their secrets," taunted Kanakamma looking at Sitamma. Sitamma kept quiet.

"I asked you to come to the hostel," complained Uma.

"You don't know what I have to go through to come to the hostel. First I have to get permission from my father and my brother. That itself gives me a headache. Then I have to put up with the grumbling and protests of these three. Even if they all agree, I must be back home by five. If you come here, we have more time to talk," explained Aruna.

"OK. But where can we talk here? Shall we go for a movie?"

"What? A movie!"

"Why? Do you need permission for that also?"

"Of course. But you're here. Will you please ask my mother for permission?"

"What? Aruna, you just finished your M. A. You're still talking like a kid!"

"I know. I'll remain a kid as long as I live in this house. What can I do? Everyone here has dedicated their lives to protecting my purity." Aruna could not hide her helplessness and resentment.

"Just go and tell your mother, Aruna. We'll go. What can happen?"

"You can't imagine, Uma. This will become a big issue now."

"Let it be. If you can put up with it the first few times, they will get used to the idea. Come on, let's try it. Let's go to a movie." Uma pushed Aruna into the house.

Aruna went in. Looked in the mirror. Hair in place. Bindi fine. She powdered her face and was selecting a saree when Kanakamma walked in.

"Where are you getting ready to go?"

"Movie," replied Aruna, arranging the pleats of her saree.

"Movie? Did you tell your father?"

"No. Uma thought of it just now. I'll tell mother." Aruna walked towards the kitchen.

"Mother, Uma and I are going to a movie. We'll be back by six. Uma will stay for dinner and leave later tonight."

She didn't wait for the reply.

Uma and Aruna practically ran out into the street.

"Isn't it too early for the afternoon show?" asked Sitamma, coming to the verandah.

Kanakamma looked at the clock and said, "It's only one o'clock. Who knows where they're going."

Such heartless talk hurt Sitamma. "God knows what I have to endure the whole day because of this girl," she thought.

Suseela went into her room and slammed the door.

Once in the street, Aruna felt safe.

"Which movie are we going to watch?"

"I don't really feel like going to a movie. Why don't we sit somewhere and talk."

"Where can we sit?"

"Let's go to the University Gardens. We can sit under our tree" Aruna said enthusiastically. "Who knows when we can sit under our tree again!"

"You're crazy Aruna, I just came all the way from the university. You want us to go there again? That's why I

asked you to come to the hostel."

"Come on, Uma, please, don't you start too."

"Okay, let's go."

They walked to the bus stop.

Every student has a favourite spot in the University Garden. Uma and Aruna used to sit under the Moduga tree. If anybody else sat there, they were unhappy. They used to sit there for hours on end, sometimes skipping classes.

"It is interesting that our final meeting is also under our favourite tree," said Uma.

"Final meeting, final vacation. What is this language? Aren't we meeting ever again?"

"We'll meet but not like this. But who knows how we'll change in the meantime. Who knows where we'll end up!"

"I am not going anywhere. It's certain that I'll remain right here."

"If my future husband also had a job here, I would have remained here too," teased Uma.

"You are saying that just because Prakasam has a job here. Even otherwise, I like Hyderabad. I've lived here since my childhood. May be that's why I like it."

"Have you both talked about marriage at all?"

"Prakasam wants to get married immediately. But I am the one who is postponing it."

"Why?" Uma was curious.

"I'd like to get a job before getting married. But when I think of the situation at home, I feel like saying 'Yes' to marriage and getting out."

Uma laughed aloud.

"It's not funny, Uma. You don't understand my problems. I have absolutely no freedom at home. I have to ask their permission for everything. I have to beg them for every paisa. If they like, they give, otherwise, not. Today you said, 'let's go for a movie.' I don't have a single paisa. Have you ever seen me going to movies or restaurants with friends. The only people I go out with are you and

Prakasam. And I absolutely hate myself when you pay for me." Aruna's eyes were filled with tears.

"Come on, Aruna. Money problems are not unusual in our middle class families. Don't take this so seriously."

"No, Uma. If we had financial problems, I wouldn't ask for money to go to the movies or anything like that. They just want me to be dependent on them. I don't like the idea of my spending any money on my own. My aunt has already been complaining that I should have been married off like my sister when I was 15 years old. By the way, did you hear, I'm already a grandmother!"

"What?"

"It's true. You know my sister who lives in Ranchi. Well, her daughter just recently had a daughter. My sister was married when she was fifteen. She gave birth to a daughter at sixteen. My brother-in-law comes from a family more traditional than mine. He got his daughter married when she was sixteen. Now he is a grandfather. My aunt, Kanakamma, has been singing this song for the last two days: 'the grandchild is born already and this grandmother,' that is me, 'is not married yet.' They couldn't find a good match for me and they didn't have the money for the dowry; that was why my father decided to let me do M. A.. Now they are afraid I may never get a match. They turn this fear into anger and take it out on me. Sometimes I think that the only way to attain freedom is to get married and leave this house as soon as possible."

Uma broke into laughter again.

Aruna turned serious. "You think this is all funny? How can you understand my situation? Your father gave you all the freedom you wanted. He sent you to Hyderabad for studies and allowed you to stay in a hostel. You can never understand how it feels to live in a house like mine. It's not a house, it's a jail!"

"No, Aruna, it's not that I don't understand you. I just couldn't help laughing at your idea of getting married for the sake of freedom."

"What's so funny about that idea?" Aruna was annoyed.

"Look Aruna, everybody says that they lose their freedom after marriage. You are talking about getting married for freedom. I can't help laughing."

"Well, my situation is different," said Aruna.

"How come? Your folks are a bit more strict than usual, but these controls are normal in most middle class families. Very few girls have the type of freedom you are asking for. But even the little liberty you have now may be gone after marriage. Who knows, Prakasam alone may turn out to be equal to all your present custodians." Uma laughed again.

"No way. Prakasam is not like that. Don't you know him? Why do you talk like that?"

"I know. Prakasam is nice. So you think you will be free to go to movies and roam around with him? But it may be that you can only do with Prakasam."

"Who else then? Why would I go out with anybody else?"

"That's right. Why with anybody else? What if I come to your house and say, 'let's go and see *Pyasa*?' You'll probably say that you have to see it with Prakasam, otherwise he might not be happy. He might even be angry. So you might refuse."

"Oh, Uma, shut up. I will not say that. Maybe I'll say that all three of us can go and see it."

"That's it then. You won't come with me to the movie unless Prakasam comes along?"

"I can't believe how stubborn you are, Uma. Okay, I won't see *Pyasa* with Prakasam. Whenever *Pyasa* comes to Hyderabad, I'll send you a telegram, I'll wait for you to come, then we'll leave Prakasam at home and go and see it. Okay?"

Uma couldn't stop laughing!

"Stop laughing!" Aruna was irritated.

"Look Aruna, your family has restricted you to a orbit. They are afraid of your leaving this orbit. You want to

break out of it and seek freedom. But to do that, do you want to enter Prakasam's orbit?"

"I will kill you if you use that word 'orbit' again. It reminds me of the geometry classes of our childhood days."

Uma laughed again. She lay down on the grass and put her head in Aruna's lap.

"Okay, what now?" asked Aruna impatiently.

"What do you want me to say?"

"Tell me what happens in Prakasam's orbit?"

"You said you don't want to hear the word, 'orbit.'"

"Okay, use some other word."

"Don't get me wrong, Aruna, Prakasam is a nice fellow. I was just teasing you. I'm sure you'll marry him and live with all the freedom in the world. Okay?"

"Are you teasing me again?"

"So, what do you want me to say? You want me to believe that you'll get married to live in freedom. Once you are married, you won't have time even to think of freedom. The housework, dirty dishes, deliveries, kids...."

"Shut up, Uma"

"Well? But that's the truth. Because you love him and because I know him, I'm not asking you to stop this marriage. Otherwise, I would have tried to talk you out of it. But Prakasam is a nice boy. I am sure you both will be happy. Don't worry." Uma tried to make Aruna feel better.

"Won't you ever get married?" asked Aruna, growing more reflective.

"No."

"What will you do then?"

"Well, there are lots of things to do besides marriage. You know how much I like my field. I'd like to get into research and reach the highest possible level professionally. That's my goal." Uma's voice expressed a strong determination.

"Can't you do that if you're married?"

"If I get married, these dreams will be washed away. If

I spend all my time in the laboratory, do you think my husband would be happy? If I'm alone, I can do whatever I want. I can cook when I feel like. I'll eat in a restaurant if I don't have time. I'll work as much as I want and relax whenever I want. I won't have to wait for anybody. That's why I couldn't help laughing when you said you want to get married for freedom. I'm trying to stay away from marriage to protect my freedom."

Aruna was lost in thought.

"I hope I didn't spoil your mood Aruna. You know how crazy I am about research. That's why I'm not thinking about marriage. But in your case, Prakasam loves you dearly. I'm sure your life will be happy."

"Yes, Prakasam is a good boy," said Aruna, as if in explanation.

"Hey, foolish girl, I didn't say that he is not. Don't take me too seriously. You can get married and yet live in freedom." Uma tapped gently on Aruna's head.

"But I'm not going to get married till I get a job."

"That is a good idea. Freedom depends a lot on financial independence. Okay. Get up, let's go to the canteen and get a cup of tea." Uma got up.

Both walked to the canteen and ordered tea. They sat for a few minutes in silence, then walked towards the Arts College.

"Why can't you do research right here?"

"I don't know. First I'd have to get admission. But anyhow, I'd like to go to Delhi."

"I love Nagarjuna University for rejecting you. You ended up here. I hope Delhi turns you down! Then you'll end up here again."

"Please don't say that. I also like Osmania University for keeping seats for students from other universities!"

They both laughed.

"These two years flew by so fast," said Aruna.

"Yes. Remember the day I met you? It seems like yesterday. You had *Krishna Paksham** in your hand and I

liked you instantly. I came over to talk to you. Do you remember what I asked you?"

"Yes. You asked me to name the two poems in it I liked best."

"I remember. You said, 'Sweschaagaanam'* and 'Abba.'"

"You hugged me and gave me a kiss. But do you know that I also met Prakasam on that same day. I had seen him before on occasions, but I'd never talked to him till then. It is quite strange that I met my two best friends on the same day."

Both fell silent again joyously recalling the old days.

"Shall we go back then?" Uma glanced at her watch. Aruna agreed reluctantly.

As they got off the bus, Uma noticed that Aruna was tense.

"Aruna, don't worry. I'm here. Nothing will happen."

"I don't know, Uma, I feel guilty and I don't know why. They don't have to say a word. I feel as if I've committed a horrible sin. When I think of having to give explanations, listening to their taunts and their orders, seeing the agony my mother has to endure because of all this, I feel it's probably better to just sit at home, than trying to venture out."

When they entered the house, the atmosphere was strange. Nobody said a word. Nobody bothered to greet them or even to look at them. They were all busy doing their own jobs. Janakiramayya was lying in his arm chair with his eyes closed. Gopalrao was reading the newspaper.

Aruna walked around uncomfortably for a few minutes and asked Uma if she was ready for her bath. Uma nodded and went to get her clothes. Aruna put a bucket of water in the bathroom.

* a book of poems in Telugu

* song of freedom

"Aruna?" called Janakiramayya.

Aruna slowly walked towards him.

"Where did you go?" The investigation had begun.

"To the University."

"You said you were going to a movie," interjected Kanakamma.

"We wanted to, but changed our minds and went to the University." Aruna wondered why she didn't just say that they had gone to a movie.

"Why did you go to University? Isn't it closed for the holidays?" asked Sitamma.

"Who knows where they actually went. Do you think they will tell us where they went?" Kanakamma directed all her displeasure at Aruna.

"What do you mean? Where do you think I go?" Aruna was angry.

"Why should I care where you go. Why should you get angry with me. You have a mother and a father. Why should I come between you?" Kanakamma stepped back a little and stood there.

"Why do you roam around unnecessarily. Things are pretty bad out on the street. We have to wait for you in great anxiety," said Janakiramayya, his anger barely in check.

"You think she cares for our fears? All she cares about is having a good time. She doesn't give a damn whether we're worried or whether our reputation is ruined." Gopalrao put his paper down and stood up.

"Why do you interfere. Let the father take care of his daughter. If you come between them, then she will say that she is as educated as you are. Please keep quiet." Suseela admonished her husband.

With Uma coming out of the bathroom, everybody acted as if nothing had happened. Aruna ran into the bathroom and cried for a while.

By the time she came back, Uma was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is Uma?" Aruna asked Suseela.

"Who knows," she said carelessly.

"Looks like she went up to the terrace," said Sitamma. Aruna went up.

"What's the matter? Everybody is looking so serious. Did they lecture you yet?"

"Yes. That's already over. Anyway, you'll be gone in a short while, so why don't we just talk."

"Of course we can talk. By the way, before I forget, I brought all the letters of yours, the ones Prakasam wrote to you. Take them and hide them carefully."

"No, Uma, I don't have any place to hide those letters. I don't even have a cardboard box for myself. Even if I had one, it will be open to everybody. Nobody could sleep without investigating what was in it. Please keep them with you."

Uma remained silent.

"After we get married, we'll come to you and get the letters."

"Aruna, you keep talking about this marriage. How can you get married? Your family will never agree to it. They'll make a big fuss."

"But I won't tell them. It would be foolish even to think of convincing them. We'll go to the Registrar's office one day and sign papers and then go straight to Prakasam's house. I'll write to my family after that. If they come to see me, that's fine. Otherwise, no loss. If I tell them earlier, they would rather kill me than agree to this marriage. My job is to make sure that this remains a secret... at least for now."

"If you need any help, come to Guntur. My folks are not exactly great either, but they'll understand. Don't hesitate to come to me if you need me."

Aruna took Uma's hand in hers. She was moved by her affection.

The talked till about eight o' clock and then came downstairs.

Aruna served dinner for both of them. After dinner, they went outside to hail an auto.

It was time to say good-bye.

"Sorry, Uma, I can't come to the bus stop to see you off."

"Don't be silly. It is so dark outside. And you'd have to come back all alone. However great your desire for freedom, you must take note of the circumstances, too."

Uma put her box in the auto and sat down.

"Will you remember to write to me?" Aruna's voice quivered.

"Of course. What else is there to do in the holidays?"

"Be careful, letters get censored here."

"What a bore! Okay"

The auto pulled away slowly. Aruna went in. She did not feel like talking to anybody. She lay down on the bed and thought about her friend and the future.

What a good friend Uma is. How well she has thought out the whole issue of marriage. Once a woman is caught up in housework and children, there might be no time at all to think about freedom. But without marriage, she could be a prisoner in the house for ever. And she couldn't think of living without Prakasam.

'Prakasam loves me dearly.'

'We'll live happily with so much love and friendship.'

'We'll work together.'

'We'll enjoy things together.'

'We'll be very understanding of each other's desires.'

'We'll have a child after 5 years. We'll raise the child with a lot of freedom.'

Aruna yearned for her own home where nobody would investigate her every move and nobody would control her.

She wanted to talk about it to Prakasam. She wanted to tell him that they should remain friends even after they got married.

She thought of her parents. They were like a cat and a mouse. She and Prakasam wouldn't be like that. She should talk about it all to Prakasam.

Aruna looked around the park for Prakasam as soon as she entered the park. The park near the Secunderabad Cantonment area is very small and usually filled with playing children, and sleeping coolies. People don't usually go there to sit and talk. Aruna and Prakasam first chose this park as a meeting place because it was unlikely that they would be spotted there by anybody they knew. Gradually they began to like the park.

Prakasam was sitting under the red flowers tree and looking somewhere in the distance. He didn't see Aruna until she came and sat next to him.

"I came in such a hurry thinking that you'd be eagerly waiting for me. You look like you're lost in thought. Are all my efforts a waste?" teased Aruna.

"Won't you please hold my hand and bring me into the real world!" begged Prakasam.

Aruna laughed.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Aruna.

"Marry me right away."

"I'm afraid of marriage."

"Nonsense. Don't keep postponing it, Aruna. Be serious. When can we get married?"

Aruna looked into Prakasam's eyes. Her heart was filled with love for him.

At the same moment she recalled Uma's words. Is marriage the beginning of a monotonous life? She is frightened of the prospect of living her whole life caught up in housework and children. But she can't continue living the way she is now. Her family will only make her life worse. Why is she afraid of marriage? Prakasam loves her dearly. She loves talking to him and laughing with him. There are occasions when he is talking to her and she wants to hug him and kiss him. But after marriage?

"How long do you want to think about it, Aruna?"

Aruna came out of her thoughts.

"Be open and tell me. What's your reason for this delay?"

"Nothing, Prakasam. Every girl feels afraid of marriage. I'm no different. Maybe I'm a bit frightened after talking with Uma yesterday."

"Frightened? Why? I'm not afraid. Why should you be? What did Uma say?" Prakasam was impatient.

"Because... look, Prakasam, life won't change much for you after our marriage. Even if it does, it will only change in a way that will make you more comfortable and happier. It's different for me."

"What! Are you saying that I'll be happy but I'll make things difficult for you? You... I love you so dearly." Prakasam was shocked.

"Listen to what I have to say. I'm not saying that you will yell at me or hit me. I know you love me. But what will I have to give you in return? What do I have to do?"

"You should love me!"

"What does love mean? Is it just looking into each other's eyes? That's before marriage. After marriage, a man sees love in the services his wife provides. When I bring you a cup of coffee in the morning, you will see my love in that coffee cup. You'll begin to see love in the food I cook, in the clothes I wash, and in the household work I do. Gradually, I will stop being an individual for you and only remain a serviceable commodity."

"Aruna, don't talk nonsense. Do you think I love you because you'll cook for me? Won't I love you even if you don't cook? I love you for your beauty, intelligence and sensitivity to every little thing. and not for the food and coffee you will serve me? Okay, I'll do all that. Agree for the marriage now."

Aruna laughed heartily.

"Uma says that women lose freedom after they get married. In my case, I have no freedom now, so I don't have much to lose. My concern simply is whether I will get this freedom when I marry you. Today I left home at four o'clock. I must return by six. I told a lie to come here. Till I go to bed, I have to constantly worry about somebody

finding out that I lied. I have to fear the consequences, the insults, the wretchedness of it all. That is the story now. But what about after we're married? Can I go to a park like this and meet a friend? Will I be worried that you're at home alone, that you might be unhappy, that you'll be upset if dinner is served late. At least in the future I'd like to enjoy my freedom. I want to spend my time the way I like. I'd like to be free to go home at six o' clock or 12 o' clock without having to explain to anybody." Aruna was speaking her heart out.

"Think for a while and you will realise how senseless this talk is and how wrong your opinion of me is. I don't understand how you can think that I'll make your life miserable." Prakasam's face turned red with anger. He sat silently.

Aruna felt sorry for him. Prakasam is a good friend. She can't think of losing him. She loves him too much to say 'No' now. Maybe she is going crazy living in that house.

"Okay, Prakasam, let me get a job, then..."

"So you will think about it after that?" There was harshness and frustration in Prakasam's voice.

"No. We'll get married when I get a job."

"Really Aruna?" Prakasam took her hand in his and kissed it.

"Aruna, you get a job. I like that. But why postpone our marriage till then? My job is pretty good. We can manage without any problems. You can take your time looking for a job afterwards."

"No, Prakasam. Marriage will have to wait till I find a job." Aruna was definite.

"Okay, whatever you say." Prakasam put his hand on her shoulder.

"Shall we leave now?" said Aruna looking around.

"Already? It is only five-fifteen."

"It will be six by the time I get home. If I reach on time, there will be peace for them and for me."

Everyone in the house is anxiously awaiting for the best for Aruna. It is a new experience for her. A private Junior College had advertised openings for lecturers. Aruna applied. She has been called for an interview today.

Her sister raised or bent her head obediently. When asked this girl does the exact opposite of what she is told," said Kanakamma. Except for Kanakamma, everybody looked happy. Kanakamma express her displeasure bluntly. "Her sister is a grandmother and this girl wants to roam the world without marriage. As it is, she has no respect for anybody; if she gets a job, she will not care for us."

Gopalrao offered to take her to college on his scooter.

Aruna was surprised. Gopalrao never gave her a ride before. He always considered it below his dignity. Aruna did not know how to react to the new affection from everybody in the house. She was happy, anxious and confused. She was also worried how the interview would go.

She was quite disappointed when she saw the crowd of applicants at the college. What chance did she have for the job? She saw two of her classmates and went to sit with them.

"Now that you have come, we might as well leave." said one of them.

"How come?" asked Aruna, quite surprised.

"This college belongs to people of your community. Why would they give me a job instead of you?"

Aruna was quite annoyed, but didn't say a word.

It was true that jobs were sometimes given on the basis of caste. But Aruna did not know the caste of the college owners. This girl is talking as if I had done something wrong, thought Aruna. She's not the only one from her community here. There must be many others. Anyway, people who give jobs on the basis of caste might already have selected someone.

While Aruna was still lost in her thoughts, the two girls went in and came out.

"We're leaving," they said.

"How come your interview was so short? What did they ask?"

"Nothing. They just looked at our faces and sent us out. Doesn't look like they have any jobs to offer." They left.

After a few others, Aruna was called.

She went in nervously.

Five people were sitting around a table. They looked at Aruna's certificates.

One of the men asked her to explain how the word 'kandoyi' is formed. Aruna's mind went blank for an instant. He then asked her to explain it in her own words, which she did by breaking the word into two parts and explaining the grammatical principle of their combination.

The same man asked her if she had a favourite among the classical poets. Aruna said that she like Srinatha. He asked her to recite a poem, any poem of Srinatha, that she liked. Aruna thought for a moment and recited the poem, "Pampavirupaksha."

"Very good. Thank you. You can go now."

Aruna almost ran out.

She wondered whether she would get the job or not. The question was answered on the fifth day after the interview.

She was offered the job.

She was called to the college and informed that she was their choice. But before she could be overwhelmed with joy, she was told something else.

The college was not getting a government grant and therefore they could not pay her the full salary. They said they could only pay her five hundred rupees. However, she would have to sign that she was getting full pay.

Aruna didn't know what to say.

They understood that she needed time to think about it. She was asked to come back by ten o'clock the next day to tell them whether the conditions would be acceptable. Aruna came home and told the news to the family.

"Right when they looked at your face, they must have

decided that you would work for them without full pay." Gopalrao passed a heartless comment.

Finally Janakiramayya and Gopalrao decided that Aruna should join.

Also, on her own, Aruna decided that she would accept the job. It would be better to accept this job and eventually look for a better one. Most of all, Prakasam would be happy. She could get out of this house soon.

That evening, for the first time, Aruna went to see Prakasam at his house.

Prakasam was alarmed at seeing Aruna there, and thought that something must be seriously wrong.

He was not convinced when Aruna said that nothing untoward had happened. She couldn't keep the news from him any longer.

"Really? That college? Thank God! So, no more obstacles for us then?" Prakasam pulled her closer to him.

"Wait. Don't do foolish things just because I came to your house. They gave me the job, but they won't give me full salary."

"What do you mean?"

"They will pay five hundred Rupees. What do you say? Shall I take it or not? I feel like accepting it."

Prakasam thought about it.

"They said they will pay full salary after they get the grant."

"I don't know. Who knows how many years they will expect you to do this bonded labour. You can never be sure about the college management. I think you might get a better job if you're a little patient."

"Why can't I take this job and then look for a better one? I want to accept this, so that we can get married."

"You're being stubborn of course. But I'm certain we can get by without those five hundred. You don't have to look at your money and mine separately."

"No, Prakasam. You don't understand. I've suffered great humiliations having to ask my father and brother for

five or ten rupees. It was degrading when I was turned down. I don't want to have to ask anybody for money to meet my personal expenses, even you."

"Okay, Okay, don't get excited. Take the job. We can look for a better one later."

"Then I will go to the college tomorrow and sign papers accepting the job."

"Aruna, why can't we also go to the Registrar's office tomorrow?"

"And then?"

"We'll go and register. We'll get the certificate in a month. Then we can announce the marriage to everybody and throw a party."

"Do we have to wait a month?"

"I think it takes a month to get the certificate. We should wait till we get it, otherwise your family might create problems."

"So, will we be married in a month?" Aruna asked looking into Prakasam's eyes.

"It would have happened long ago, but you gave those speeches about freedom and independence and kept putting it off."

Prakasam kissed Aruna's hands.

Aruna hugged Prakasam and remained silent for a few moments.

"How come you're not saying anything?"

"I don't feel like talking."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." Aruna said, as if she were in a dream.

Prakasam kissed Aruna's head. Both jumped up when they heard a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Aruna asked quite anxiously.

"It doesn't matter whoever it is, but I think it is the washerman," said Prakasam opening the door.

"Uncle, my mother asked me to borrow your match box." Four year old Sirisha came in.

Aruna felt relieved.

"Sirisha is my neighbour's daughter." Prakasam introduced her to Aruna and gave her the match box. Sirisha left.

"She's very cute," said Aruna.

"Our baby will be more cute."

Aruna felt shy and Prakasam laughed heartily.

"I have to leave now," said Aruna.

"Already?"

"It's already been a long time. Anyway, just another month. Shall we live in this house after we get married?" Aruna looked around the room.

"We will, if you like it. Why don't you see the whole house first."

"The whole house. Only two rooms."

"How many rooms do you want? I think it would be fine for both of us to live in one room."

Aruna went into the kitchen and promptly ran out, seeing the mess there.

"Some day I should come and arrange everything."

"You're already talking like a housewife," teased Prakasam.

"Somebody has to keep the house clean."

"Okay, clean the house and clean me also," said Prakasam, acknowledging the sorry state of his housekeeping.

"We'll move to another house. It will be nice to have another room."

"Are you crazy? Aren't we going to live in one room? Do you want separate rooms for you and me?"

"Not for us. If anybody comes to visit us."

"You have a lot of foresight, Aruna. So we'll have to look for a three room house."

"That's right. I have to leave now."

"I'll come to the college at ten tomorrow. We will go to the Registrar's office from there."

Aruna's mind took flight, like a pigeon into the sky.

2

"My dear, Uma,

Last month flew by so fast that I didn't have time to write to you.

On the fifteenth of August, I too attained independence along with the country. It's already a month since I gained independence! Lots of things have happened during this past month.

I was angry with you for just sending us a telegram instead of coming to our wedding.

But I was too happy to remain angry with you for long. On the morning of the fifteenth of August, I told everyone at home that I was going to the college to participate in the festivities, but instead went to Prakasam's house.

I wrote a letter to my father and mailed it. The next day we went to the Registrar's office and collected the marriage certificate.

A few of Prakasam's friends, and our friends, Hema, Vani and Pushpa came with us. We all went to a restaurant to celebrate and from there we went to our new house.

It's very funny. You know, but our marriage went off smoothly, without any hitch. After two days, my father came.

You can imagine the turmoil at home during those two days.

I was afraid to face my father.

But everything was resolved very easily.

Father was very clever. He told everyone that this marriage had been performed in accordance with his

ideals. He gave a party for a few relatives and friends on the twentieth. That morning Prakasam and I went to my parents' house. My aunt, sister-in-law and brother were extremely uncomfortable with their anger like a lump in their throats. They could neither swallow it, nor give vent to it. When I saw the state of my mother, I felt like crying. She was the one who suffered the most because of my actions.

I am sure they all blamed her.

"She didn't even notice that the daughter was planning such a disgraceful action.."

"She couldn't control her daughter..."

"She is responsible for the bad reputation the family has to suffer now..."

And more.

Mother didn't know what to do other than cry.

For the rest of her life, she can't escape the tyranny of the aunt.

Well, anyway. My father's hypocrisy reached a new height on the twentieth. He praised me and Prakasam in front of the assembled guests.

After they left, the dam burst. He opened up.

"Whatever happened, happened. But from now on, you will have nothing to do with this house. Your aunt and brother were against this party. But I had to do it for the sake of the family's dignity and honour. You can leave now."

I was very angry and very sad.

We came home at midnight even while my mother was crying her heart out.

That is the story from this side. Prakasam's was a different story.

He should have told his people earlier. I think that nobody would have objected if he had done that. But Prakasam says, 'You don't know. Because it's all over, they are talking like that. Otherwise they might have created plenty of problems.' I'm not sure. Do you

remember, Prakasam used to say that he has six sisters. None of them recognised our marriage. Oh, I didn't tell you about the trip to his house in the village. After the marriage Prakasam's mother got his older brother to write to us, asking us to visit them.

We went.

Prakasam's mother is a very nice person. Very intelligent. Prakasam's father died when the children were very young. She raised the children by herself, had the daughters married, managed the farm—she did all that by herself. She certainly looked like a very competent person. She was nice to us. She likes Prakasam very much. Maybe because of that, she liked me also. His brother's response however, was cool throughout. His sister-in-law asked me a thousand questions. On the one hand, she was curious. At the same time she looked down on me. It was quite a strange event in her life.

She invited the neighbours and all the relatives to come and see me. In a place near Tenali that is called Andhra Paris, people looked at us, as they would view animals in a zoo. It was really frightening.

When we went walking in the street, people rushed out of their houses to stare.

I was very annoyed, inter-caste marriages still provoke such reactions in this country.

Prakasam's sisters didn't come. Of course, the eldest sister was unhappy that Prakasam didn't marry her daughter. Can you guess why the others didn't come? It looks like they had been dreaming about getting gifts of silk sarees and grinders.

Prakasam told me that they always had said, "Marry whomever you want. But we expect to get silk sarees and grinders as dowry. If we don't, we won't come to the wedding."

Strange people. Really, not a single person came.

We returned after staying there for two days. My

mother-in-law promised to come to our house soon. Now, what do I write about us.

I am very happy. I can't tell you how much I feel lost in love.

Really Uma, I am truly happy! feel like there is nothing more I want in life. I'm glad I had the courage to do this. My heart is filled with love and gratitude for Prakasam for getting me out of that house. Some times I get scared even at the thought of what would have happened if I didn't have Prakasam.

Fortunately, there is very little time to imagine or think of things like that. Prakasam and I have shared and enjoyed every experience.

The other day we read Krishna Sastry's poems together. Sometimes we spend many hours talking about nothing in particular. How can I tell you how fantastic love is! Why don't you fall in love with someone soon? I don't know what is happening to me in this love.

How many colours...!

How much brilliance...!

How many shapes...!

How many experiences...!

How beautiful the world is...!

When I look at the sparkle in Prakasam's eyes gleaming with love, my heart feels like a chrysanthemum opening up to the warm rays of the winter sun.

If I don't see him for a while, or if he is late from work, I feel like a winter weary barren tree.

When I see him again, new desires sprout and my mind feels like a flower garden in the spring.

I get exhausted when I am caught up in the heat of passion, very like being in the heat of the summer sun, but my heart overcomes this fatigue in the cool evening breeze, and I fall asleep amid the scent of jasmines.

What more can I write Uma? However much I write, it is difficult to describe the experience of love.

Why don't you come here.

Come and see my joy for yourself.

Come and listen to my gossip.

Uma, when are the entrance exams at Jawaharlal Nehru University? On your way to Delhi, please do come to Hyderabad. Come and stay with me for a couple of days. Anyway, you have to come up to Kazipet. Coming here is only a bit farther. If you tell me when you're coming, I'll book a ticket for you. Write soon. I'm writing this letter during the leisure hour, but now it's time for my class. I'll drop this in the mail box on my way.

Yours,
Aruna."

Uma sat in the Tamil Nadu Express and opened Aruna's letter leisurely. The letter had arrived just as she was leaving the house. From the size of the envelope, it looked long, so she decided to read it later on the train and stuffed it into her bag. The Guntur train was packed with people. She changed trains in Vijayawada, got on the Tamil Nadu Express, and opened the letter after finding her seat.

Uma is very anxious about her exams, but the thought that Aruna is living very happily relieves some of that tension. She is planning to go to Hyderabad after the exams. She looks at her bag. The books appear to be looking back at her. She is startled. She has never been so worried about exams before. These books will continue to frighten her until she passes the exams and begins her research.

If she can't get a seat in research, all her plans and hopes for a research career will be dashed. She is determined to make sure that her dreams will be realized. She had great difficulty in convincing her parents of the reasons for going all the way to Delhi for research. If she doesn't get through these exams, she will have to settle for doing research in Guntur or Hyderabad and she doesn't like that prospect. She wants to go to a place that offers

greater opportunities.

After this, if possible, she would like to go to the United States.

She hoped to do good research and publish her work.

After a while, Uma came out of her thoughts and opened a book.

It was almost six in the morning. Being a winter day, it was still slightly dark. Yet, Uma managed to locate Aruna's house.

"Uma, is that you! How come you didn't write to me that you were coming! I thought you would never come!" Aruna was surprised and delighted at seeing Uma.

"Well, I am here now. But why do you look like this? Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm okay. Where did you come from?"

"From Guntur. I got a seat in Delhi. I have to go there in two days. Once I start, I may not come this side for a while. So I thought I'd see you before going there." Uma sat down in a chair, exhausted from the journey.

"That's great. Okay, why don't you go and wash your face. I'll make some tea."

"I will. Is Prakasam still sleeping?"

"Yes."

"Good. We can talk till he gets up. Let me quickly wash up." She walked towards the bathroom.

Aruna cleared the dirty dishes away, put them in the sink and made some tea.

"It's wonderful that you got the seat. I feel like a heavy burden is lifted from my chest. You worked so hard and you must have been really tense." Aruna handed a cup of tea to Uma.

"Was it that burden that made you so thin? Aren't you feeling well? What's the problem?"

"What else... the usual one," Aruna said with a dull smile.

"What do you mean? You look so weak. It's just three months since you got married, how come you look so

exhausted. What is Prakasam doing about this?"

Aruna laughed again feebly.

"What's that laugh? What happened to you?"

"Same thing that happens to every married woman. Don't worry about me."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I'm pregnant. I'm in my second month."

"Really?" Uma asked in shock.

Aruna nodded.

"Why did you want children so soon. I thought you didn't want to do this."

Aruna remained silent.

Prakasam woke up. Walking into the hall, he was surprised to see Uma. "So you finally came. Aruna was dreaming about you every day. I can't tell you how jealous I feel that she thinks about you constantly."

"Come to Delhi. I'm sure she will think about you too."

"Delhi? That's too far, I can't stay away from Aruna even for half an hour."

Everybody laughed.

"Aruna is weak," said Uma looking at Prakasam.

"Yes. She doesn't eat much. She vomits a lot. I am scared. The doctor says that it will be better in another month. She has become very thin in the past 15 days." Prakasam picked up the newspaper and went into his room.

Aruna and Uma went into the kitchen.

"Won't Prakasam come into the kitchen?" asked Uma.

"He does, but I ask him not to. He makes a mess with one thing or another," laughed Aruna.

"Let him make a mess, he'll slowly learn. Don't spoil him," admonished Uma.

"Prakasam will help me! Tell me about Delhi."

"What do I know about Delhi? Let me go and settle down first."

"You went there once, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. But I stayed in somebody's house for four

days and wrote my exams. I didn't do any sightseeing. I'll write to you as soon as I settle down. You both can come there and we'll see the city. Till you come, I won't go to see anything."

"How will it be possible now to travel so far?"

"What is that tired talk, you sound like a grandmother!" Uma was annoyed.

"Why don't you sleep for a while? I know you didn't sleep the whole night. I'll wake you up around ten."

"Will you go to the college?"

"Would I go to college when you're here?"

"Okay, you do your work. You've become a perfect housewife. Imagine what it would be like after you have children," Uma said going into the guest room and wondering about it herself.

Aruna finished all her work and served lunch for Prakasam.

"You're not going to the college today, right? Give me your leave letter, I'll drop it off on my way."

Aruna wrote a leave letter.

"Aruna, don't look so sad. This is a time for you to be happy. Why don't you and Uma sit and talk about old times. Go out and have fun. Well, I should be leaving for office now."

Prakasam left.

Aruna made tea and woke up Uma.

Uma said that she didn't really sleep. She was just lying down.

"Okay, tell me some gossip."

"What should I say. I told you the main news."

"How come you were so foolish? Didn't you have any plan?"

"I don't know. It all happened before I could even think of a plan. It was all new in the first days. I was also afraid. I used to feel very shy to talk about these things with Prakasam. It all happened before I could get over all these inhibitions."

"OK. But why don't you have an abortion?"

Aruna buried her head in Uma's lap and sobbed.

"What's this now? If you don't like the idea, get an abortion. Are you afraid of having one?"

"No, but Prakasam doesn't like it."

"Why not?"

"I don't know—He was very happy when I told him about the pregnancy. I was worried and he was surprised. When I told him that I was too shy to tell him about planning, he brushed it aside, saying that it wouldn't have worked anyway and that he would have never followed it. When I mentioned the possibility of an abortion, he was very angry and shouted at me. 'Are you really a woman?' He apologised later, but his words really hurt me a lot. I thought of abortion not because I don't like children, but because I wanted to wait for a while. He agreed that it's not a sin, but he thought that having an abortion is terrible. We didn't talk to each other for a couple of days after that. Finally I gave in."

"Whatever happened, happened. Don't worry so much about it. It may be good in a way.."

Aruna stopped Uma from saying what she was going to say.

"I will raise children, of course. What hurt me most was that Prakasam didn't understand my desire to delay it for a while and he didn't even try to understand why I was thinking about it. He talked as if I had been planning to do something wrong and he had prevented me from doing it. He was very indifferent and grim with me till he was convinced that I'd stopped thinking about an abortion. These days he's behaving very affectionately again. I'm very hurt by all this. He loves me when he feels like it but becomes very preoccupied when he doesn't. If he were different and tried to understand my point of view..."

Aruna's eyes filled with tears.

"You crazy girl, you're really going overboard with your thinking. Everybody's nature is different. But tell me,

if Prakasam did something you didn't like, wouldn't you be upset? Wouldn't you argue with him? Wouldn't you show all your displeasure till he agreed with you?"

"You think it's like that?"

"What else? Because he wants to have children, he was upset when you talked about an abortion. He showed his displeasure as anger. Now that you've compromised, you shouldn't continue to brood over these things. Didn't you talk everything out with him?"

"I did. Now he agrees that his behaviour at that time was wrong. But I suspect he's saying it just because I agreed not to go for an abortion. Back then, he was behaving as if he would never love me again if I had the abortion. It was that fear that made me compromise. I'm not able to forget it."

"Come on, Aruna. You can't be so sensitive. You should toughen up a little bit. You have to make compromises under some circumstances. What do you think marriage is?"

"Love made me sensitive. Marriage is asking me to become harsh. What will I do? For the first time, I'm wondering what marriage really means." Aruna laughed weakly.

"Don't ruin your brain with so much thinking. Let's go to the university. It has been so long since I saw my department. I should tell everybody about my research." Uma got up.

"Why don't you just go. I don't feel like it. I'll get bored there."

"Come on, Aruna. We won't stay there very long. We'll finish our work in the department in thirty minutes and then go and sit under our tree. Come on, wipe that tired look off your face. Are you going to give me some lunch or not?"

After lunch, both went to the university, roamed around the whole day and came home by evening. Aruna had lost some of her mental fatigue in Uma's company and looked

cheerful. After Prakasam came, they went out, saw an English movie, had dinner at a hotel, came home and gossiped till they fell asleep.

The next evening, Uma left.

Aruna made a decision to cheerfully carry her pregnancy to term and welcome the baby into her life.

Prakasam felt relieved at seeing the change in Aruna.

Aruna found it very difficult to leave her three month old baby with her mother-in-law and return to lecturing at the college.

For the previous three months, the baby had been the only thing in the world for Aruna. She enjoyed watching the changes in the baby as she grew, recognising each new thing. The three months had rushed by so quickly.

Now all of a sudden, it was difficult to stay away from the baby for a whole day.

She left the house in the morning only after giving Kamamma umpteen number of instructions.

Kamamma laughed and said, "I raised eight children by myself...."

Aruna couldn't help crying when she left home. 'I should get used to this slowly. I feel so awful, the baby must be feeling even worse looking for me.' These thoughts made Aruna miserable.

Even though her mother-in-law was with her, she used to take care of her baby herself All the time guarding against any discomfort to her.

But once she arrived at the college, she got caught up in a different world.... the classes, students, lectures, colleagues... time went by so fast.

Aruna sat down for lunch reading the newspaper, but her thoughts were with the baby.

What if the baby is crying continuously?

What if she is looking for her?

What if she is not drinking her milk?

Aruna felt like going home immediately.

She did not even hear Kesavarao, the zoology lecturer, calling her name out twice, trying to get her attention.

Vimalakumari joked that Aruna was in the world of her daughter and was unlikely to hear anything they might say. Everyone laughed and Aruna was startled.

Kesavarao asked, "There is something I have to talk to you about. Can we go to the library?"

Aruna didn't understand what was going on, but walked to the library with Kesavarao.

"Aruna garu*, a lot of things have happened in the college during the three months you were on leave. Somebody might have told you already." Kesavarao paused for a moment.

"No. Nobody has said anything. What happened?"

"Our colleagues decided that I should be the one to tell you. We formed an association in the college."

"An association?"

"Yes. Remember what they told us when we were hired? They said that they would pay us full salaries when they got the government grant. We agreed and have been working for five hundred Rupees a month. Well, since June, the college has been getting the full grant. They didn't even tell us! But such things are hard to hide. When we discovered it, ten of us went to talk to the Committee. They said, 'We got the grant, but we can't pay full salaries. The development of the college requires a lot of expenditure.' They refused to listen to our protests that it is wrong for the college to prosper at the expense of its teachers. We then called a meeting of the lecturers. Except for five or six people, everybody else agreed to do anything necessary to get our full salaries. Those five or six who did not join us are closely related to the management, and they are unlikely to cooperate with us. The rest of us formed an association and have given all our demands in writing to the committee. We are thinking of calling a strike if the

* Telugu equivalent to "ji" in Hindi.

college won't pay us full salaries by January. I hope you'll also join our association." Kesavarao looked at Aruna for her approval.

"I'll certainly join."

"Then, please sign here." Kesavarao pulled some papers out of his bag.

"The association fee is ten Rupees. We all decided that that was a fair sum for each person to contribute towards association expenses."

Aruna gave him ten Rupees.

"That's all. That's what I wanted to tell you. We are thinking of meeting for an hour every Friday after college to talk about our common problems. I'll send you a notice." Kesavarao left.

Everybody surrounded her when she reached the department.

"Did you join the association?"

"Yes."

"We knew you would. We were sure you would join," everybody said in unison with bright smiles.

That evening, Aruna bathed the baby and while putting her to bed, she told Prakasam everything about the association.

"Why create problems. Why can't you just keep quiet till you get a good job and then leave. If the thirty of you go on strike, they will just throw you out and bring in thirty new people. What will you do then?"

"Wouldn't this be a good job if they paid full salary? Anyway, what's wrong with asking for what we are legally entitled to? Does anyone get any benefits these days without going on strike?" Aruna asked very seriously.

"Okay, madam. Get full salaries. It's profitable for me if you get a full salary, so why should I argue."

"Why is it profitable for you?"

"Why not? Isn't your money mine?"

"You wish! I won't give you a paisa out of the pay increase."

"Okay, keep it. Even if you keep it, it's for my daughter only!"

"Why? Can't I spend my own money on anything other than you and your daughter?"

"Okay, you spend it the way you want." Prakasam took the baby into his lap.

"I'll earn the money for my little darling." He kissed the baby's cheek gently.

"Why does she need money?"

"What do you mean 'why?' For her education. And her marriage has to be celebrated in a grand fashion." Prakasam spoke as if the future was passing before his eyes.

"Are you going to arrange her marriage?"

"Okay, both of us are going to."

"Don't include me in that. I won't do it. She would do it herself. Why should we interfere? Did our families arrange our marriage?"

"In our case, it was a different situation. Because our people didn't agree to it, we had to do it in a simpler way. Why should she go through that misfortune? I want to celebrate her marriage in a grand manner with whomever she chooses. Why must she marry in the same simple way we did?"

"Do you know what you're saying?" Aruna said angrily.

"Why? What did I say? Did I say something wrong?"

"I'm proud of the way we got married. I think marriages should be like that, without the great ceremony and huge gathering of relatives. It seems like you would have preferred a grand ceremony if it hadn't been for the circumstances. I'm very happy that my parents didn't agree to our marriage. You seem to be resenting it." Aruna was very agitated.

"You always come up with twisted logic, Aruna. I was just imagining what it might have been like if it had been an enjoyable occasion. Why are you getting so angry?"

"Today you're feeling sorry that it wasn't an enjoyable

occasion. Tomorrow you'll complain that you didn't get dowry. The day after, you'll be saying that you didn't get a scooter. Where would it all end? Why do you have this attitude?"

Seeing Aruna's mood, Prakasam retreated.

"What do you mean—I didn't get dowry? How can there be a better dowry than a pretty and intelligent girl like you?" Prakasam put the baby in the cradle and came to Aruna and pulled her closer to him.

"Does that mean you wouldn't have loved me if it hadn't been for the beauty and intelligence?"

"This intelligence and this beauty—if they were missing, then you wouldn't be Aruna. You'd be somebody else. Why would I love somebody else?"

Aruna was lost in thought.

"What are you thinking now? I don't want you to get angry again, but you think too much about unnecessary things. I know. Right now you have two or three questions pricking your mind like thorns, right?"

"Let me guess. Does Prakasam want dowry?"

"Is Prakasam sad that the marriage wasn't conducted in a grand fashion?"

"Would Prakasam have loved me if I weren't pretty?"

"Tonight, you are going to let these thorns prick you all night. Right?"

"You know me so well." Aruna laughed in spite of the fact that she was lost in her thoughts.

"Of course, would I marry you otherwise?"

"But I wonder if you know as much about yourself." She wasn't sure if she should say it, but said it anyway.

"You think so. Don't I know how madly I'm in love with you?" He kissed Aruna's eyes.

"Anyway, why don't you give up your crazy thoughts for now. Let's go. Give me some food. I'm hungry. Where is mother?"

"She went to the temple. She'll be here any time now. Poor lady, she's getting bored here. She has to be with the

baby the whole day. Your mother is really a much nicer person than you are."

"All the goodness in me comes from my mother," quipped Prakasam very proudly.

3

Before leaving for the college on Friday, Aruna told Kamamma, "Today I'll come home late, but I forgot to tell Prakasam. He wanted us to go to a movie. Please tell him that I'll be late today, but we can go to the movie tomorrow."

She went to the cradle kissed the baby and was about to leave when Kamamma asked, "We have run out of the medicine that I was giving the baby in the afternoon. Is it alright if I don't give it to her today?" The baby had been having a fever for the last two days. Before going to the college, Aruna usually told her mother-in-law about the timings and dosages of the medicines to be given to the baby. But the previous night, she had been fine and had played. She also had slept well during the night.

"Oh, no. Is that medicine finished? I'll go and get some more. That medicine has to be given. If she gets a fever again, give her a spoon of the medicine in the green bottle. But I think she won't be getting a fever today." Aruna walked to the cradle again and looked at the baby.

Kamamma nodded. "I think so too. Her face looks clear. But fetch the medicine anyway before you leave."

Aruna went to the medical shop, brought the medicine back home, then left for the college in a hurry.

In the evening, after classes, all the lecturers assembled in a room.

The main item on the agenda was to discuss the demands to be placed before the College Committee. The discussion went on endlessly.

One man said that not a single demand made sense....

Another said that only one of the demands made any sense..

The discussion went on for a while and the two put the demands aside and started arguing about personal differences.

Kesavarao intervened to quiet them down and expressed his opinion on the demands.

Everybody started talking all at once and then, realising that nobody could hear under those circumstances, they started talking with the people sitting next to them.

Aruna was vexed. The other women were just waiting to be told that the meeting was adjourned so that they could leave.

The discussion was no longer about demands. It had deteriorated into personal attacks and gossip.

Aruna turned to Suguna who was sitting next to her and said, "Shouldn't we think about the demands and express our opinions? Why don't you say what you think? At least we might be able to stop this chaos for a while."

"No thanks. They'll take care of it themselves. Why should we worry? We signed the minutes away. That's enough. Actually, we can leave now, can't we?" she said, looking at the other women.

The others nodded their heads in agreement.

The men kept on arguing. Nobody seemed to know what was being talked about. Finally, a steering committee of six people was formed to come up with final recommendations on the demands.

The man who said that only one of the demands made sense and the man who said that none of the demands made sense were among the six on the steering committee. Aruna wondered whether the two would ever come to an agreement on anything.

It was announced that they would have another meeting only after the steering committee made its recommendations.

Everyone felt relieved. The people dispersed. By the

time Aruna caught a bus, it was seven thirty. She felt very tired.

She would like to get home and have a cup of hot tea, take a bath and play with the baby for an hour before starting to cook. So she'll start making the meal around nine. Dinner will be around ten. Her mother-in-law must have soaked the clothes to be washed. She won't have time to do them. She would wash them the next morning.

It is so difficult to catch up with all the work when she reaches home two hours late. The very thought makes her feel tired. A hot cup of tea would probably help in getting things started. She reached home with these thoughts on her mind and was surprised to see that the house was locked.

Did they take the baby to the temple? Had she got fever?

The neighbours said they didn't know; neither did the people in the opposite house.

Aruna's hands and legs felt numb.

Prakasam doesn't usually go to the temple. Something must have happened to the baby.

She gathered all her strength and decided to go to the hospital. Just as she was rushing out of the front gate, an auto pulled up and Prakasam stepped out of it with the baby in his arms, Kamalamma following him.

"What happened to the baby?" Aruna was worried and wanted to take the baby into her arms.

"Nothing happened. Thanks to your care, she's doing fine." Prakasam said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. He went into the house ignoring her.

"Attayya*, what happened?"

"I don't know. She was all right at noon. Around three o'clock, her body seemed a bit warm, so I gave her the medicine. But the fever increased. By five-thirty, she began having fits. We were very scared and took her to the

hospital. The doctor gave her some injections and in about half an hour she recovered. Just to be sure, we thought it would be better to wait there for a little longer. She looked all right. So we bought the medicines and brought her home."

Aruna went to the cradle and stood there looking at the baby.

She wondered how much the little one had suffered. Her eyes filled with tears.

Kamalamma laughed looking at her.

"You both are exactly alike when it comes to worrying. It's not unusual for children to get fever. A little bit of indigestion can cause a lot of discomfort. You grew up with all these pains and problems. There's no reason to be so worried. You should have seen how anxious he was in the hospital."

Aruna slowly walked into the bedroom. Prakasam was lying across the bed.

She sat next to him and asked, "Were you very worried?"

Prakasam didn't speak.

"Are you very tired? Did you at least get a cup of tea?"

"He had his snack and tea after coming from the office. The doctor also ordered some tea for us. Looks like she's the sister of a friend of yours. You're the one who didn't eat anything. Come and eat something and have some tea." Kamalamma called Aruna.

Aruna went and made three cups of tea. She gave one to Kamalamma and came into the bedroom with the other two.

"Why don't you get up and have some tea. The baby is okay."

"What do you care whether she's okay or not?"

Prakasam sat up on the bed.

"What do you mean?" Aruna was astonished at the question.

"Do you have to ask? You went about your own

* mother-in-law is addressed as "atta" or "attayya" in Telugu.

business not even knowing that the baby wasn't feeling well. Mother didn't know how to get around the city. Fortunately I came home in time. What would have happened if I had also come late?" Prakasam was very angry.

"We should always make sure that one of us is home. I forgot to tell you today. From now on, I'll tell you beforehand whenever I know I'm going to be late. You can come home early. When you have things to do, I won't go anywhere. I'll be sure to stay at home."

Prakasam looked at Aruna with impatience written all over his face. "You don't seem to care about what happened. What if she had had fits at three thirty?"

Aruna froze at the very thought.

"Don't go to the college when the baby isn't well. I just can't understand how you could go to the college today, and even then, why you didn't come home earlier. She had a fever yesterday evening. Couldn't you stay with her for one day?"

"She was okay in the morning. I thought she was getting better."

"Why didn't you think that she might have a relapse?"

Aruna was becoming very upset with his attitude.

"How come you didn't think about it? Why did you go to the office? Why didn't you remind me about it?"

"I didn't think you could be so stupid. I will remind you from now on."

"Why remind me? Who knows what I'll do in my stupidity? Take the day off when the baby isn't well and take care of her."

"That appears to be my fate now. Aruna, let me tell you, I'll be very angry if you neglect the baby."

"What do you mean? Did I willfully neglect her? You're being so intolerant just because you had to take care of her for one single day. What really happened? I wasn't here at the right time, but you were, and you took her to the hospital. Do you know how many times I took her to

the hospital by myself. Do you know how many nights I stayed awake taking care of her while you were sleeping peacefully? How can you suddenly decide that I am stupid and careless just because I wasn't here on time once? What is this inquest just because I was not there one day? You want me to feel guilty and admit to some wrong..."

Aruna could not speak, her sorrow choking her.

"Stop arguing. The baby is sleeping soundly. There's nothing to worry about. Aruna, he's been very upset ever since the baby's fits started. Don't take him seriously. Come and take a bath." Her mother-in-law called out to Aruna.

Prakasam got up and went into the bathroom. The baby turned on her side and started crying. Aruna ran to the cradle.

The baby was crying because she had wet her clothes. Aruna changed her clothes, cleaned the baby, applied powder on her and took her in her arms. She couldn't hold back her tears as she looked at the baby.

Could I neglect this baby? She's a part of my blood. She's a part of my life. I breathed life into her. I brought her into this world. How could I neglect her? How could Prakasam talk like that?

The baby started crying again. Aruna gave her some milk.

"Amma, serve the food." Prakasam shouted to his mother.

Aruna looked up. Prakasam's face hadn't changed. He still looked angry. He was combing his hair vigorously.

Prakasam believed that Aruna had neglected her duty as a mother.

He was questioning why she didn't think of the baby and why she went to the meeting.

But he forgets that he had wanted them to go to a movie that evening. What if the baby had had fits at eight o'clock while they were at the movie? Prakasam doesn't even believe that it is his responsibility to put the same

question to himself. He has no doubt that when it comes to the baby, it is entirely Aruna's responsibility. That's why he believes that it's her fault that she wasn't home today on time and he's angry because she doesn't admit it.

"Come, have I served for both of you. Go and eat, Aruna, I will keep an eye on the baby." Kamalamma came to the cradle.

"I am not hungry, Attayya. You both eat. I want to be with the baby."

"How can you not be hungry. You've eaten nothing since morning. Come on, go and eat."

"No, Attayya, I can't."

Prakasam went and sat down for dinner.

Kamalamma chided him generously as she served dinner. "Did the devil get hold of you? Why did you make her cry for no reason? After all, what's really happened? Isn't the baby doing just fine?"

After Prakasam had eaten, she came to Aruna. "Come Aruna, I'm hungry. But I won't eat unless you join me."

Aruna could not say 'no' to her.

While eating, Kamalamma asked, "What happened today? Why were you so late coming home?"

"We had a meeting, Attayya. You know that they're not giving us full salaries now. All of us, the lecturers, had a meeting to discuss how to ask the Committee, and what to do if they refuse to consider our request. If I had thought that anything like this might happen to the baby, I wouldn't have gone to the meeting."

Aruna's voice betrayed her resentment at having to give this explanation. She was saddened at her own inability to resist giving an explanation. She fell silent.

"Aruna, you shouldn't feel so bad. Nothing went wrong. Of course, it will be good if you get your full salary. You were right to go to the meeting. He didn't know about the meeting and he got scared when the baby was in pain. That's why he behaved so carelessly. Just ignore him. Haven't you been taking care of the baby all this time.

What has he done?"

Kamalamma's endearing words brought tears to Aruna's eyes. She quickly finished her food, put the baby into bed and lay down next to her.

A month later when Kesavarao told her that the Steering Committee was ready to make its recommendations and that a meeting had been called, Aruna could not quickly decide whether or not to go.

She remembered the events of a month ago. It had taken Prakasam a couple of days to behave normally again. After that he never talked about it again, acting as if it had never happened. That Sunday they had even gone to Birla Temple. He suggested that Kamalamma could go into the temple with the baby, and they both could sit outside and talk. He made her laugh with silly jokes. Aruna decided not to brood about those events again, fully believing that Prakasam had simply been upset because the baby had been so ill.

Even though everything seemed all right now, Aruna was apprehensive and fearful at the thought of going to another meeting. She had to think carefully about it.

She finally decided to attend the meeting.

The baby was doing fine. All the household work was taken care of. She made snacks for a whole week and put them in boxes. Kamalamma wouldn't have to worry about making snacks and looking after the baby at the same time during the day. It looked like there was no reason not to attend the meeting.

But Aruna felt that she had wasted her time. Of the eight women on the college staff, she was the only one at the meeting. The rest left before it began, making excuses about having other plans or having to be home early.

The meeting went on as usual. Of the two-and-a-half hours it took, less than thirty minutes went into discussing the issue at hand, and the rest of the time was spent in

jokes, personal arguments and gossip.

If Aruna had not been anxious to go home, she would have probably enjoyed it. But she was worried about the baby. The Child's what if Kamalamma left her on the cot and got busy doing something or the other? What if she fell off the cot? What if Kamalamma didn't mix *Farex* well and the lumps got stuck in throat? What if she was crying non-stop with stomach ache? She should have told Kamalamma that when the baby cried like that, she should check the baby's clothes for ants and, if that wasn't the reason, she should give her some Baralgan drops.

All those worries gave her a pounding headache. She was very tense. As soon as the meeting was over, she ran to the bus stop. Kesavarao followed her.

"You seem to be in a great hurry," he said with a smile.

"It's very late. I'm worried about my baby."

"Who takes care of her when you're at the college?"

"My mother-in-law. If it weren't for her, things would have been even more difficult for me."

"So, there is somebody looking after her. You don't have to worry so much then."

"It must be difficult for her to take care of the baby the whole day. I should go and relieve her."

"You are much better. Look at all the other women on our staff. None of them came."

"When we think of all the work at home, it's difficult to stay here at the college for a meeting. Anyway, look at the meeting today. We spent, maybe, thirty minutes discussing our demands, while the rest of the time was wasted in unnecessary talk. How can we justify leaving the work at home when time allotted to the meeting is wasted like that?" asked Aruna.

"It's just one day out of the week. You say it's unnecessary talk, but don't you think it gives us a chance to observe the character and tastes of our colleagues. It becomes a bit easier for us to do our jobs if we're able to joke about our problems in the classroom.. Don't you have

any interest in observing human nature?"

"That is using a big word," Aruna said, looking in the distance for signs of her bus.

"That is not a big word. Well, if all you do is give lectures and go home, how will you know anything about the world and other people around you. For me, not knowing much about these things would make life seem empty. I hope you don't mind my putting it like that. It's just that I thought you'd understand, because I've noticed the kind of books you read..."

"Oh, my bus is here." Aruna's face brightened.

"From your enthusiasm to go home, I imagine you like your house very much. I'd like to come and see it one day."

"Yes, sure. See you." Aruna got into the bus in a hurry.

It was about six forty five. She would get home by seven. Aruna was very hungry. 'On the days of these meetings, I should have a snack in the canteen before the meeting. Kesavarao talks very nicely. I never thought of it that way, but he says that life is a waste if we don't know about the world and about people. That's a very nice thought! Why did he notice the books I was reading? From what he said, he likes to learn about people. Maybe he was trying to learn about me also. It's a clever idea to judge people on the basis of the books they read. After all, isn't it books that brought me and Uma so close! I should tell Prakasam about Kesavarao. I wonder what Prakasam is doing now. He's probably playing with the baby and waiting for me.' Aruna came out of her thoughts as the bus arrived at her stop.

There was a nice breeze that evening. She felt exhilarated.

Prakasam was standing at the door with the baby in his hands. Maybe he is worried about me, she thought.

"Why are you so late?" he asked.

"There was an association meeting today."

"You could have told mother about it in the morning."

"I didn't know about it. When they told me there, I

hesitated, but decided to stay. Were you very worried?"

The baby wanted to jump into her mother's arms.

"Wait. Let me go, wash and come back. I am very dirty." She put her bag on the table and went into the bathroom.

"Why don't you take a bath. It's already late anyway," said Kamalamma. Aruna felt like it too. After the bath, she came to the baby and Kamalamma brought her a plate of snacks.

"Please don't give me any tea, Attayya. I had some at six in the college," said Aruna. Kamalamma came and sat there.

"My mother is spoiling you," said Prakasam.

"Why do you say that?" asked Kamalamma.

"She is supposed to come from college and serve you. But you are the one serving her now."

"What do you mean 'serving'? When you work the whole day, it's nice to have someone offer you a cup of coffee when you get home. Remember the days when your brother was in school? All of you used to wait for me till I came back from my work on the farm. Then I had to do all the housework before finally taking a bath and making a cup of coffee for myself. Some days it was eight o'clock by the time I had that coffee. I used to wish that there was someone home who would offer me that coffee when I got back." Kamalamma remembered the old days.

"Attayya, I give him coffee when he comes home, but he doesn't call that serving. When you give me tea, that becomes serving for him."

Turning to Prakasam, she asked, "How many times have I made your tea?"

"You've made it for me, and I've made it for you. I didn't think of that as some kind of serving."

Then he added, "We're different. She's your mother-in-law. And she's making tea for you. I'm saying that you are extremely lucky to have a mother-in-law like that."

"That is true. It's my good fortune to have her."

"What about me. Aren't you lucky to get me?"

"I should think about that," Aruna said seriously.

"Okay, you got me there. Anyhow, what is the news about your meeting? When are you getting full salary?"

"It's too much to expect at after just two meetings. We gave the college one month's notice to accept our demands. If they don't, we will go on a mass casual leave."

"What does that mean?" asked Kamalamma.

"That means all the lecturers will stay away from work for one day."

"What will they lose if you do that?"

"They can't run the college without teachers. The newspapers will report it. And everybody will come to know about it."

"Suppose they don't agree even then?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"So all these meetings are just to talk about one day's casual leave?" asked Prakasam.

"You think it's easy to convince everybody to go on leave for a day? It was only after a great deal of argument that everyone agreed to it. Our meetings are a bit funny. People even talk about the problems they're having in their classrooms. The other day, students put nettle powder on the math lecturer Jogarao's table. He suffered serious itching on his hands." Aruna couldn't help laughing.

"That's a nasty prank. I didn't think students did such things." said Kamalamma.

"You don't know, Attayya, these days students aren't behaving like students. They're more like rowdies."

"Did you try any pranks in college?" Prakasam asked.

"Maybe I did, but not such ill-mannered things."

"Don't tell me there are good and bad pranks. Everybody thinks that their pranks are good."

"Your work must be difficult." Kamalamma said after some thought.

"Of course it is. It is not like your son's job where he can work for an hour and sit relaxing for the rest of the

day. When I am in class, it is a tough test of my skills. It's strenuous."

"Difficult job indeed! you barely work half the year." Prakasam was trying his best to enhance the image of his own job.

"Okay, this gossip isn't going to fill our stomachs. Give me the baby and go and do something about the cooking." Kamalamma took the baby.

Aruna walked into the kitchen.

Aruna's regular attendance at the Friday meetings became a cause for annoyance not only for Prakasam, but also for her female colleagues.

"Is it true that you're going to the meeting every Friday?" asked Varalakshmi.

"Yes. How come you're not coming at all?"

"It's just not possible for me. If I'm not home by five o'clock, the children and my husband get very angry and upset. Anyhow, what can there be to talk about every Friday?"

"You should go and see what they talk about. Why would anybody tell you what they discuss?" laughed Suguna.

Aruna didn't understand what was so funny.

"I get awfully bored in meetings. If you want, I can go on a day's leave. I can wear a black badge. If you want me to give a hundred Rupees instead of ten to the association, I can do it. But I just can't bear the thought of going to the meeting." Vimalakumari spoke as if she were revealing a divine truth about herself.

"But what could there be to discuss for so long anyway? Just gossip I bet. If I don't have anything better to do, I can sit and gossip, too."

"I know."

Aruna couldn't understand what they were trying to say. They were not only defending their absence from the meetings, but also making it sound as if she had been committing a sin by going to them. There was so much

sarcasm in their voices! She was bewildered by their attitude.

That Friday, Aruna thought at length about whether to go to the meeting or not. If the women had such a poor opinion about her, she wondered what the men might be thinking.

If a meeting has been organised and everyone has been invited, her colleagues should not respect those who don't attend and look down on those who do. That wouldn't make any sense. In fact, she should be the one they respect, because she is thinking about the association as much as they are. Anyhow, why should she care whether they respect her or not? As a member, it's her privilege and duty to go to the meetings. It shouldn't matter what the whole world thinks of it.

But what if these women talk like that again tomorrow? It's so difficult to listen to such talk. But why should she worry about their opinions so much? Why should she make an effort to make a good impression on them?

She suddenly remembered what Anjaneyulu was telling her about another woman. "Prabhavathi is really a great lady. She's very highly educated, but she's equally humble. When she leaves home, she doesn't lift her head until she arrives at the department. Even then, she does it only if she has to. She doesn't worry about anybody else. Her work is her world. Even when she talks, it's with great caution."

Hearing about this woman irritated Aruna. Does one become educated by merely reading books all the while remaining ignorant of one's surroundings? How can anybody appreciate a selfish person who doesn't interact with anybody else? If this lady is so cautious in speaking, how well could she teach her class? If she's so particular about keeping her head bent, why doesn't she just stay home and always keep her head lowered? Aruna felt extremely irritated.

So these men must like highly educated women who

are very obedient and subservient.

What a disgusting attitude! She found it difficult to tolerate.

Should she skip the meeting?

The other women who never go to the meetings would also get full salaries if the effort was successful.

They go home by five. Why should she stay back till seven-thirty and be tense and preoccupied with fears of the baby falling ill or Prakasam being angry.

What would happen if she didn't go? But why shouldn't she? She wants to go. Not just for the salary. It's nice to sit and talk with your colleagues about things. Besides, even if it is only for a short while, it's good to talk seriously about issues of interest. As Kesavarao had observed, she also likes to get to know people. Though she is tired and tense by evening on the days meetings are held, she does feel mentally exhilarated. When she likes something, why should she stop? If someone doesn't like doing something, they don't have to. That's it. There is nothing here that defines some people as good and others as bad. With those thoughts, she went to the meeting.

In spite of many such meetings, the Committee ignored their demands for the whole year.

But Prakasam continued to get angry every time she went to a meeting. It became common for him to make fun of the meetings and for Aruna to be irritated with him.

But the next year, the lecturers were determined to bring the matter to resolution. As soon as the college opened, they started pressing their demand vigorously. The strike started within a month.

They pitched a tent in front of the college and gathered in it.

The students who came to talk to the lecturers all agreed that the demands were fair. They staged a sympathetic strike and boycotted classes.

Newspaper reporters came and took photographs.

The lecturers decided to go on a relay hunger strike the next day.

The next day's newspaper carried the news of the strike as well as a photograph. The photograph showed Aruna holding a placard and screaming the demands. Because Aruna was the only woman in the tent, it looked like the journalists had paid special attention to her.

Prakasam angrily called Aruna while looking at the newspaper. Aruna came running.

"What is this?" He pushed the newspaper at her.

"Oh, our photo is in it?" she took the newspaper in excitement.

"I don't like your attitude."

"What did I do now?"

Aruna didn't understand what his problem was.

"There are other women in your college. Why is your photo here and not those of the others?"

"None of them came to the tent. They were at home."

"Why did you go alone then? You could have stayed at home too. This photo has probably appeared in many newspapers. You're screaming like you're possessed. Everybody must be laughing at you by now."

Aruna's face turned pale.

"I don't see why you can't understand me. Today everybody will ask me about your photo in the paper. At least if there were other women in the photo, it would have been different. Disgusting—"

Aruna stood there staring at Prakasam.

"Why are you staring at me? At least from now on, think before you do something like this. You waste time thinking about silly things, but when it comes to important things, you don't seem to know anything."

"What's the trouble this time? What happened, Aruna?" Hearing the commotion, Kamalamma came in.

"Her photo is in the paper." Prakasam dropped the paper there and went into his room.

Kamalamma looked at the paper.

"It looks good. So what's he screaming about?" She asked, looking at Aruna.

By this time, Aruna was trembling with anger. Prakasam changed his clothes and went out. Aruna felt heavy-hearted and helpless. Why did he think of it as shameful if her photo was in the newspaper?

He doesn't like her going to the tent.

He doesn't like her going to meetings.

Why did he change like this?

Is this really the way he is? Or, has he changed?

She had never thought of it this way, but maybe he didn't like her having a social life of her own.

Should she stop doing the things that are important to her just because Prakasam doesn't like them?

She had liked sitting in the tent yesterday. It was a great experience to shout slogans, to explain their demands to the students, to talk to the journalists....

When she likes something, and when she knows in her heart that there's nothing wrong with it, why should she stop?

She got up suddenly and went about her work. By the time she had bathed the baby and finished cooking, it was ten o' clock.

"He doesn't seem to like it. Can't you leave it?" asked Kamalamma.

"No Attayya, I can't. It is very important. I have to go. The hunger strike starts tomorrow. We have to talk about it."

She left without waiting for a response from Kamalamma.

By the time she returned, it was two o' clock.

Prakasam didn't speak the whole day.

Aruna, for her part, made no effort to talk to him either.

The next day Aruna woke up early and got busy with household work. She washed the clothes that she usually washed in the evening. She made the curries and was

giving a bath to the baby when Kamalamma came in to wash rice.

"I won't eat, Attayya. Today I am on a hunger strike. I'll eat only at night."

Kamalamma didn't know what to say. She went in, removed some rice and came back to wash the remaining part.

Aruna brought the baby inside and was choosing her clothes when Kamalamma said, "I will make some upma, eat a little and go. How can you live on an empty stomach the whole day?"

"It's okay, Attayya. It's only for one day. If I have a bite to eat here and then go, it wouldn't be a hunger strike."

"Amma, she is the incarnation of truth," said Prakasam. "Why do you worry? There is no harm in going on a hunger strike. She will go and sit around there for a while, then come home, eat at night and sleep it off. You are here to do everything for her. She can afford to go on a hunger strike or do anything else she wants."

Aruna didn't say anything. She put some toys in front of the baby and went into the kitchen.

She finished her work, swept and mopped the place, and went to take a bath.

She had to be in the tent by ten. It was already nine-thirty.

She finished the bath in a hurry.

While Aruna was sitting in the tent, she didn't realise how tired she was. But the moment she stood up, she felt light headed. Not having the energy or patience to wait for a bus, she went home in an auto.

Kamalamma brought her a cup of tea as soon as she came home. She drank it, then fell asleep right away.

When she woke up, her whole body ached. She was surprised at the results of fasting for just a few hours. When she came into the hall, the baby rushed over to her demanding to be picked up.

"She's been trying to come to you the whole time

you've been asleep, and I had a difficult time holding her back. This is a naughty kid. She's not easy to stop."

"You could have let her come." She picked up the baby.

"Oh no. You looked so exhausted. I didn't feel like waking you up. Why don't you come and eat now. The baby has already eaten."

"I want to eat again," said the baby.

Aruna's heart filled with enormous gratitude towards Kamalamma.

She ate and fed the baby again.

Then she put the baby next to her in bed, and fell asleep while telling her stories.

Prakasam came home late and declined when Kamalamma offered to serve him dinner.

Kamalamma, who stayed awake till he came home, was annoyed. "She didn't eat in the morning, and now you. I don't like this."

For the next four or five days Aruna and Prakasam did not speak to each other.

Prakasam would come home, play with the baby for a while, and go out. He usually returned home late at night, ate, then fell asleep immediately.

Kamalamma was pained seeing this development between the two of them.

Prakasam would get irritated whenever she tried to talk to him about it. Aruna listened to whatever she had to say without saying a word in return.

One day Aruna came home with a bright smile on her face.

"Attayya, we won. I will get full salary from now on!" She picked up the baby and kissed her.

"Thank goodness. All your hard work paid off. Will the college open now?"

"Yes, the college will run normally from tomorrow. Prakasam was angry with all this, but if we hadn't taken a strong stand and fought hard for it, the Committee would never have agreed to this."

"When he hears the news, I'm sure he'll be happy. He yells when he's agitated, but feels bad afterwards."

Aruna was very happy. The fruits of hard fought battles are indeed sweet.

She wanted to tell all this to Prakasam. She wanted to try to explain to him what she thought about the whole experience of the last few days. Aruna waited for Prakasam eagerly.

Even as he walked in through the door, Prakasam asked, "I heard your strike was successful. Is that true?"

Since he asked the question, Aruna did not hesitate anymore, and told him all the details.

"You were angry that I was active in the strike, but don't you see now how wonderful the success is?"

Aruna wanted an opportunity to talk about her feelings.

"If you hadn't done what you did, wouldn't all this have happened anyway?"

"Not that it wouldn't have happened. But don't you see, participation in the whole process gives me a great feeling of joy, pride and satisfaction."

"I don't know. I didn't like your attracting everyone's attention, and all the people asking me about your photo in the papers."

"Why do you talk as if I wanted to have my picture in the papers? Why can't you think of it as a simple matter?"

"Why do we have to talk about it now? Think of it as the end of a bad episode. Let's go out to a movie."

"Now? What about the housework?"

"Mother will take care of it. Come on, get ready."

"It isn't right for us to leave all the work for her and go to a movie."

"She'll be fine. She'll be delighted that we've ended our quarrel. If you doubt it, let me ask her." Prakasam called out to his mother.

Kamalamma came in.

"Mother, Aruna and I want to go to a movie. Is it okay with you?"

Kamamma laughed. "Why do you ask me? Would you stay back if I said 'no'?"

"If it's inconvenient for you, we won't go."

"It's no inconvenience for me. You should go. The baby and I will go to the temple."

"If the baby sees us going, she won't keep quiet. Let us take her with us," said Aruna.

"She wouldn't let us watch the movie," said Prakasam.

"Don't take her with you. She'll be restless and she'll keep you from enjoying the movie. I'll take her to the neighbour's house, then you can go. She'll ask for you for a while, but after that she'll be all right." Kamamma took the baby and went out.

Aruna got ready quickly. Prakasam went out to get an auto.

"If it's for movies or some thing that you like, it's fine to leave all the work to her. But if she does it for me some times, you make a big issue out of it." Aruna could not help deriding him.

"For our happiness, I will do anything."

"Shouldn't we do something for the happiness of others also?"

"I can't. I wouldn't know how. You're doing enough for both of us."

"But you get angry when I do it."

"I won't be anymore" Prakasam put his hand on Aruna's shoulder and looked into her eyes with affection.

Aruna wrote a long letter to Uma about the college, the strike, her participation in it and Prakasam's reaction. She waited eagerly for Uma's response.

Her purpose in writing the letter was to convey to Uma that she had not lost her independence when she got married.

Uma was happy to write back.

Dear Aruna,

I was very happy reading your letter.

I was very pleased that you wrote to me so openly about the events in your life, and about your thoughts. That is what friendships are supposed to be all about. I've been very busy with research and a couple of other things, and didn't have time to write to you about my life. One of these days, I'll sit down and write you a long letter that will drive you crazy! Watch out for it. I'm very happy and pleased that even after two years of marriage, you have remained the same old Aruna that I knew. I am very delighted that my opinions about marriage were wrong.

I used to think that everything else takes a back seat to the family after marriage.

My thinking was based on my observation of many married people. Let me give you an example of a beautiful family who live in the apartment right next to me.

Malathi has a Ph. D. in Botany. Her husband is a doctor.

Do you know what she does every day? She cleans and mops the floor till every inch of it shines.

When I ask her why she doesn't find a job, she says, 'What about the house?'

You should see the floors of her drawing room and kitchen. They simply sparkle.

All the almirahs in the kitchen are light blue. And all the boxes in them are also light blue.

All her energies go into cleaning floors and boxes. She refuses to listen to me when I ask her to think about getting a job or at least teach some poor kids who wouldn't have an education otherwise.

She feels sorry for me when she looks at my room. It's full of books and papers, with dirty clothes littered everywhere.

She thinks that my life is ruined, and that I'm living alone without any sense of joy or happiness.

Given that the world is full of people like this, it gives

me great joy to know that you're doing things you like and that you're keeping your individuality even when Prakasam finds it difficult to accept. I'm particularly delighted at your spirit.

I'm certainly surprised that Prakasam was troubled by such small things. That bothers me a little bit. And your letter prompted me to think about so many new things. We'll talk about them when we meet.

My research is almost in its final stages. It probably won't take more than six months to finish. After that, there's a chance that I might get a job in the department right here.

I'm not thinking about a job so much right now. I'll go back home for a while after I finish the thesis work. Needless to say, I'll come to see you then.

Your baby can probably say 'aunty' by now, but did you tell her anything about Uma aunty?

Yours,
Uma.

4

During the summer holidays that year Kamalamma wanted to go home for a while.

Aruna also thought it would be good for her to spend some time in the village. In the city her world was restricted to the house and the temple. In the village, she'd have other things to do and many people to talk to. It was quite remarkable that she had patiently stayed with them for so long. She deserved some rest, at least during the holidays. So Aruna didn't object at all when she expressed the desire to make a short trip home.

Because Kamalamma was not around, the baby now filled Aruna's life. She always followed Aruna. Whatever work the mother did, she pretended to be doing the same thing.

When Aruna swept the house with a broom, the baby did the same with a small broom.

When Aruna washed vessels, the baby cleaned her toy pots and pans.

When Aruna cooked, she came with a small plate demanding things to taste.

As soon as Aruna finished her work around the house, the baby was ready with picture story books to be read to her. Aruna was very happy that the baby liked books. Every day, she spent the afternoon showing her pictures, reading stories and singing for her.

Aruna realised that when the college reopens, she and the baby would not have the joy of spending so much time together. She felt that most children would love to lie down with their mothers and talk and talk till they fell asleep. But they might not get such chances. For children of

working mothers, such joys would be very rare.

One afternoon, Aruna was teaching the baby a song.

"Say 'chitti chilakamma'!"

"Chitti chimalakka."

"No, not chimalakka, say 'chilakamma.'"

"Chimalakka," said the baby very clearly.

"No, not like that. First say 'chilaka.'"

"Chilaka."

"That's right. Now say 'chilakamma.'"

"Chimalakka," said the baby very clearly.

"Well, okay, chitti chimalakka."

"Chitti chilakamma." When the baby said that, Aruna couldn't stop laughing. "So, you know how to say it, but pretend that you don't." She hugged and kissed the baby.

"Now say, 'amma kottindaa?'"²

"Amma kottindi."³

"No, not 'kottindi', say, 'kottindaa?'"

"Amma kottindi."

"You stubborn girl, okay, now say, 'thota kellavaa?'"⁴

"Thota kellanu."⁵

No matter how many times she tried, the baby would not learn the words in the question form. She always repeated the words in the answer mode.

Aruna pretended to be angry. She closed her eyes and lay down quietly. The baby started singing "jo...rama lali megha syama lali"⁶ in her attempt to put her mother to sleep. Then they both fell asleep.

Aruna woke up when she heard knocks on the front door.

She opened the door. It was Kesavarao.

¹ little parrot
² did mother hit you?
³ mother hit me.
⁴ did you go to the garden?
⁵ I went to the garden.
⁶ a lullaby in Telugu.

Quite surprised, Aruna asked him to come in.

"I thought of visiting you several times, but I didn't get around to it. Today, I was in the area, and thought of dropping in."

"It's okay, I'm glad you came now. Can I get you some water?"

"Yes, please."

Aruna brought him a glass of water.

"What are you doing during the holidays? Did they call you for evaluation work?"

"They called, but I didn't accept. My mother-in-law went home to her village. It's difficult for me to leave the baby alone and go out."

"Where is your baby?" Kesavarao looked around for her.

"She's sleeping, but she'll probably get up soon." Aruna went in to check on the baby and came back.

"What are you doing during the holidays?" He asked again.

"Not much really. There's enough work at home. If I get a good book, I read. That's about it."

"What have you read recently?"

"I read Ibsen's play *The Doll's House*. I'm not used to reading books in English, but I heard that this one was very good, so I read it patiently. It really was quite good."

"I haven't read it," said Kesavarao a bit awkwardly.

"I have it. I can lend it to you if you want."

"Yes, please." Kesavarao replied with some hesitation.

Aruna noticed his hesitation and asked, "Do you like reading?"

"A little bit," he said, taking the book from her.

"Nora's character in this play is excellent. The last few scenes are done superbly. Nora says in the end..., well, we can talk about it after you read it." Aruna stopped.

As if waiting for Aruna to stop, Kesavarao began, "I came to ask you for a favour." He stopped there, with some hesitation again.

"What is it about?"

"A few friends of mine want to start a magazine."

"What type of magazine?"

"Not a literary magazine. We want to write about the injustices suffered by people in our society. For example, small children should not be working in factories. But they are working in a lot of factories in the city. We can study this problem carefully and bring out all the facts in one issue. We could dedicate each month's issue to the detailed analysis of one problem. Not only news analysis, if we can find poems or stories, relating to the problem we can publish them all in that particular issue. We hope to make people aware of the injustices prevalent in our society."

"Sounds good," Aruna said though she wasn't sure what the benefit of such a venture really would be. "What's the name of the magazine?"

"*Velugu**."

"A very nice name."

"We need your support for the magazine." Kesavarao said with great hesitation.

"Me? What could I do?" Aruna was surprised.

"To print two thousand copies of *Velugu*, it will cost about two thousand Rupees every month. We will have to sell the magazine at a low price. That means we have to bear the entire cost essentially by ourselves. So we thought that if we could find twenty people who would each give a hundred Rupees every month for one year, we could establish a reputation and sustain the magazine. I came to see if we could count on you to be one of the twenty people." It seemed like a great burden had been lifted from his chest.

Aruna thought about it. A hundred Rupees was a lot of money. But a magazine could survive if she could manage to spare a hundred Rupees for twelve months. She could afford to give that much. Hadn't she managed when she was getting only five hundred? It might be a bit

difficult, but if it meant so much for the magazine, it would be good to help. After all, she and Prakasam spent so much money on unnecessary things. Why hesitate when such a good cause could be supported?

"You can think about it for a while. I'll come again another time and you can tell me what you've decided. Also, if sparing a hundred Rupees is difficult for you, you could give whatever you can afford."

"I will do it. There's nothing to think about. It looks like a worthy project and I would like to support it even if it causes some inconvenience for a year."

Aruna went in, brought a hundred Rupee note and gave it to him. Kesavarao gave her a receipt. "The first issue will come out by July first. I will come over and give you a copy," he said.

"You can come and see me even without the magazine."

"No.. I meant, of course. Why must I have a reason to come?" Kesavarao was very uncomfortable saying that.

Aruna laughed at his predicament.

"That book... make sure you don't give it to anybody. If you lose it, you'll have to buy a copy to replace it."

"Yes. I'll return it as soon as I finish reading it." Kesavarao stood up, getting ready to leave.

"Wait for a few minutes. Have a cup of tea and then go." Aruna went into the kitchen.

The baby woke up and came into the hall looking for her mother. She looked curiously at the stranger sitting there.

Kesavarao asked her to come to him, but she turned around and ran into the kitchen. Aruna gave her a glass of milk and came into the hall with two cups of tea. The baby came and sat in a chair next to her mother.

"What do you call your baby?" Kesavarao asked.

"Why don't you ask her?" Aruna encouraged him to talk to the baby.

"Baby, what is your name?"

* light

"They didn't give me a name," said the baby.

"Ah—" Kesavarao was surprised. Aruna laughed.

"It's true. We haven't named her yet. Her father and I couldn't agree on a name. I want to call her *Chukka** or *Muvva**, but Prakasam wants to call her *Divya*, *Saundarya*, or *Eiswarya*. He thinks that my choices sound crazy. I think that his names sound like those of some heavenly creatures, not of mere mortals. Prakasam thinks the world of his daughter. He really believes that she came from the heavens to be with us."

Kesavarao was amused by what Aruna said. Preparing to leave, he said, "I also like your choices for the name. She really looks like a pretty star."

In the evening Aruna gave a bath to the baby, finished all the work and waited for Prakasam.

"Amma, Abaddalu* is here." The baby was pointing to the neighbour's daughter who just came to their house.

"Why do you call her Abaddalu? Her name is Sirisha," corrected Aruna.

"No, aunty, Baby calls me Abaddalu. Didn't you know?" said Sirisha taking the baby into her arms.

"But why? Is she already giving nicknames to people?" Aruna asked in disbelief.

"One day I told her that you had come from the college before you actually did. She ran around the house looking for you. Her grandmother told her that I was just telling lies and that you hadn't come yet. From then on she has been calling me 'Abaddalu.'" Sirisha kissed the baby.

Aruna was surprised at the baby's intelligence. Sirisha took the baby to her house.

As soon as Prakasam came, she gave him a cup of tea and told him about the visit by Kesavarao, about the

magazine and her donation to it. First Prakasam was surprised, then he became angry.

"Are you mad? A donation of hundred Rupees a month? Is this a house or a Dharma Satram*? How much did you think a hundred Rupees a month means?"

"A hundred Rupees a month means a hundred Rupees a month. What do you mean 'how much?'" Aruna was unhappy with this turn in the conversation.

"I am asking, how much it is per year?"

"Twelve hundred."

"For that money, you can get two yards of real estate in a prime location in the city. Did you know that?"

"You want to buy two yards of land?" Aruna looked at Prakasam in amazement.

"If two yards were all we needed, then you could give as many donations as you liked. It takes at least two hundred yards." Prakasam said as if he were feeling sorry for her ignorance.

"So, are you saying that this twelve hundred should be saved? What would have happened if my salary had been only five hundred?"

"It is beyond me, the way you argue. What would we do if you didn't have a job at all? What would we do if my salary was five hundred, not two thousand a month? Should we think about our lives the way they are now or the way they were some time ago?"

"So what are you saying? I want to spend a hundred Rupees out of my salary on whatever I like. Are you saying that I can't?" Aruna asked as if she were demanding a definite answer one way or the other.

Seeing how seriously Aruna had asked the question, Prakasam held back a little.

"Whenever you talk, it is about 'my money, my expenses'. Do I talk like that?"

"No. You don't. True. But I've never tried to control

* Star

* anklet Bell

* Lies

* a place where destitutes live without having to pay rent.

your money or your expenses. Have I?"

Aruna looked at him as if to let him know that this was the main question.

"True. You've never asked me about money matters. But it hasn't been necessary. This is why. I don't waste money. I don't smoke, I don't drink. I don't gamble. If I did any of these things, you would have need to control me. Why do you need to control me now?" Prakasam asked with a lot of self confidence.

"Are you comparing the donation to wasting money on drinking and gambling? Do you know what the donation is for? Did you hear at all what I was telling you?" Prakasam recognised the anger in Aruna's voice, resented it, but didn't want to say anything in response.

"Why don't you answer? Do you remember what I said? What did I give the donation for?"

"Big deal! This magazine which is supposed to save society from all evils, who knows whether it will even come out. What will you do if they collect the money like this and then just go and spend it for themselves?"

"Prakasam, don't say foolish things just to make me angry. He is my colleague. A very good man. Don't make him a cheat for the sake of our hundred Rupees." Aruna tried hard to suppress her anger.

"Anyway, I don't like giving a hundred Rupees a month as a donation. If you want, give them ten or fifteen Rupees" Prakasam said as if he were closing the discussion.

"So, if you don't like it, that's it? What about me? What if I like it? Shall I tell them, 'my husband doesn't like it, so I can't give you the money?' Why should I do that? I'm not giving your money. Ever since we've been married, you've been managing my salary. Have I ever asked you any questions? You don't waste money. That's true. But did I ever ask you how much we spend, how much is left, and what you're doing with it? You bought a TV on installment. You know I didn't like it. But, did I tell you not to buy it? Did I ask you to stop paying for it? Did I ask you to

return the TV? Chee.. You are making it look as if it were a crime if I spend hundred Rupees out of my own salary on something I like. Do we need to argue about it? Am I a little girl? Don't I know how to decide what's worthwhile and what is not?"

Aruna was too upset to say anything more.

"You're not just a little girl, you're a crazy girl also. All you know is how to get excited and angry very fast. If you knew better, how could you compare buying a TV for ourselves with donating money to somebody else."

"I know everything. You may not see the benefit of this donation in terms of Rupees. But, the satisfaction of doing good, how could you get that from any amount of money saved?"

"You are too clever. I can't argue with you. Do what you want with your money. I understand now why your family put you under such control.." Prakasam was about to get up from his chair and leave.

"What? What did you say?" Aruna asked, trembling with anger.

"What did I say? Why are you screaming?" Prakasam showed his annoyance.

"What did you just say? Do you understand why they controlled me? Tell me! Tell me why?"

"They were afraid of my excessive intelligence. But you seemed to like it. They controlled me and lost me. What do you want to accomplish by controlling me?"

"What can I accomplish? I am just an incompetent fellow. Do what you want. I don't care. And you don't have to care about what I think."

He quickly changed his clothes and walked out of the room.

On his way out, he saw Sirisha bringing the baby. He took the baby and went out.

Prakasam's words— 'I understand now why your family put you under such control' —stung Aruna very badly.

The control that she found unbearable from childhood...

The control that she despised....
 The control that she had hoped to break with Prakasam's help...
 That she thought she had broken away from...
 He says she needs this control!
 He thinks that she needed it not just in childhood, but all her life!
 She could not move, smile, talk or do anything without the approval of her brother, father, and aunt.
 They suppressed her desires and interests.
 They tried to snuff out her thoughts.
 She thought they tortured her.
 Prakasam is saying that's not the case.
 He thinks that they protected her from doing foolish things. He thinks that they prevented her from bringing shame or disaster on them with her superintelligent or stupid actions. Maybe that is what they thought. If Prakasam believes that, it shouldn't come as a surprise if they thought so too.
 Her brother and father never had had the opportunities to think well of her.
 She could excuse them.
 What about Prakasam?
 Didn't Prakasam recognise her desire for independence?
 Didn't he love her yearning for freedom?
 Apparently not.
 He said long ago that he loved her for her beauty and her intelligence.
 She had been foolish. Though she knew right from the beginning that she cherished her freedom, she didn't make it clear to Prakasam. She should have. She shouldn't have assumed that he understood it.
 Prakasam loved her only for her beauty.
 Though he used to say that she was excessively intelligent, he clearly thinks now that she is foolish.
 He just loved her body.

Just the flesh!
 How terrible!
 Aruna cried aloud.
 How disgusting!
 How shameful!
 There was nothing about her that he liked besides her body.
 All her yearning for freedom and the struggles she had gone through for it since childhood didn't mean anything to him.
 "I can't stand this." She kept repeating it like a deranged person and cried aloud.
 Aruna didn't remember how long she had been sitting there like that. When Prakasam came home with the baby sleeping on his shoulder, she wanted to get up and take her but she could not.
 Prakasam placed the baby on the bed, went and closed the front door and came back. She was still sitting there.
 Looking at Aruna scared him. She was looking far away and her eyes seemed blank and lifeless.
 "Aruna, get up, and get some sleep," he gave her a hand and pulled her up. As if she had awakened from a deep slumber, Aruna suddenly pulled her hand away and went to bed. Prakasam followed her and sat next to her on the bed.
 "Did you eat?"
 Aruna shook her head to indicate she had not.
 "Get up and eat then."
 She shook her head again, indicating that she didn't want to.
 "Angry with me?"
 Aruna remained silent.
 "I thought about all this while I was out. I guess I behaved rashly. The problem is that you provoke me. Anyway, I wonder why we argued so much for a lousy hundred Rupees. You probably told me about it when I was in a bad mood. We have been married for so long and

you still don't know how to watch my moods before saying things. Don't you know how much I love you? If you tell me in a sweet manner that you want to do something, will I say 'no?' You should just learn how to ask me. Instead of doing that, you just start arguments. Okay, at least I will try not to get into these arguments with you."

Prakasam kissed her below the neck. "If you keep giving me these kisses, I don't care whether you spend hundreds or thousands."

"Prakasam, I'm too tired even to cry. Please go to sleep. Don't say things that make me cry."

"This is the problem with you Aruna. How long do you want to remain angry for such a little thing? I told you it was my fault. What else do you want?"

"Did you say it was your fault? When?"

"Just now. What have I been saying?"

"Is that how you accept your fault. Okay, fine, it's not your fault. Go to sleep. I have a headache."

Prakasam didn't understand the reason for the sarcasm in Aruna's voice. He went to his bed and lay down.

"The baby hasn't eaten yet, right?" asked Aruna.

"She did. We both ate."

"Where?"

"At my friend Niranjanrao's house."

Aruna didn't want to say anything more. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

The headache was pounding. It didn't look like she could fall asleep soon.

Her mind kept going back to Prakasam's words, even though her commonsense told her it was of no use. Looks like she has to watch his moods when she talks to him. She has to please him before asking for anything. She has to kiss him. Then he will grant her wish! What had she become? The repulsive thought sent a shiver down her spine.

Why was Prakasam talking like this?

Had Prakasam always been like this?

She had never realised that Prakasam thought this way.

Should she conduct herself just in ways acceptable to him?

Didn't Uma say that before the marriage? She said that Prakasam might turn out to be the equal of when it came to her father, brother and aunt in controlling her.

How true were her words!

Why didn't she think of it?

She believed that Prakasam loved her.

Doesn't he love her?

He does.

He certainly loves her.

She tried to hold on to that thought as if she had to convince herself.

Maybe she was excessive in the way she analysed things. Maybe she should not have argued so much. Is there anything wrong with telling him things in a nice way?

What if she stops doing things he doesn't like?

As if listening to these thoughts, the Aruna within her protested. But she successfully suppressed the revolt.

Yes, from now on, whatever she wants to do, she'll first talk to Prakasam and get his consent. He gets angry because she doesn't tell him first and says a lot of things. So she gets worked up, too. And things go from bad to worse. She should make an effort to stop these arguments.

She tried hard to concentrate on these thoughts. She tried hard not to allow the voice inside her to express any resentment. She tried to sleep.

Prakasam turned in his bed. She was afraid that he might be awake and start talking again. She remained quiet and closed her eyes tight.

In the early hours of the morning Aruna woke up to knocks on the front door. Her eyes were burning and her throat was dry. She tried to get out of bed, but felt light headed. She sat down on the edge of the bed for a few

moments. There were knocks on the door again. She gathered all her energy, walked slowly to the door and opened it. It was Kamalamma.

"Attayya, why didn't you write to us? We could have come to the bus stop."

"Suddenly I felt like seeing the baby. The auto boy brought me here without any problem." Kamalamma put her suitcase and baskets inside.

"Why are you looking like that? Looks like your eyes are burning."

"I had a small headache last night. Couldn't sleep well." Aruna went into the kitchen to avoid further conversation about it.

When Prakasam woke up, he was surprised to see his mother. Happy, too. He hoped that his mother's arrival would help Aruna return to normal soon.

"How are brother and his children? Did any of my sisters come to see you?" inquired Prakasam.

"Everybody is doing fine. Suguna and her children came and stayed for four days."

"You should have brought annayya* and vadina* also with you."

"I can't simply bring them along as if they were little kids. They'll come if they want. They know where you live, don't they?" Kamalamma said disparagingly.

The baby woke up, saw her grandmother, and came running to her, calling her, "Kamalamma."

"Look at this insolent brat. She's not calling her 'grandmother' anymore. Now she is 'Kamalamma.'" Aruna picked up the baby and kissed her, then went into the kitchen and brought a cup of tea for Prakasam.

"Attayya, after you left, this girl has become very naughty. She doesn't listen to me any more." Aruna started talking to Kamalamma about the baby. Prakasam

picked up the newspaper and pretended to read while listening to their conversation and wondering how to talk to Aruna again. He wanted to reestablish a normal relationship with her and then talk her out of the hundred Rupees donation.

Aruna was making Upma while Kamalamma was arranging the boxes she had brought from the village in the almirah.

"What did Lilakka say, Attayya?" Aruna asked, just to engage her in conversation.

"She can say anything she wants. People who think they are in control, say anything they like," said Kamalamma. Aruna was surprised.

She had never heard Kamalamma speak so reproachfully about anyone. Aruna understood that Kamalamma had come back so soon from the village because something troublesome had happened there. The harshness of her comment undoubtedly was related to the problem.

"What happened, Attayya?"

"There's not much to say. Lila didn't like my staying there and interfering in their affairs. She said that straight to my face. I didn't feel much like staying there after that. So, I packed my bag and came here. I'll stay with you as long as you let me. After that I'll find a room somewhere and live somehow. I have to live my life till it lasts."

Whatever had happened in the village clearly had hurt her deeply and hardened her soul. Her eyes were dry and her voice very harsh.

Aruna felt deeply sorry for Kamalamma.

"Don't say that, Attayya. You don't need our approval to live here. Isn't this your house too?"

"I've lost my place in the house that my husband and I built brick by brick. How can this rented place be mine?"

"You're talking like that because something has made you angry. But how can anybody say that you don't have a place in your own house. They're living in it only by virtue of your generosity. They can't say that you don't

* brother

* sister-in-law

have a place there."

"You didn't know, Aruna, but I have no legal rights to that house. The house and property were in my husband's name. In the property settlement after his death, my elder son got them. I have no rights to them at all. I spent my whole life taking care of that house, and keeping it in good condition. When I was asked to leave, I had to leave it with a heavy heart. But even if I had the authority, I could not possibly live there and ask them to leave. People would say that a heartless old woman had cast her son's family out on the street. I couldn't live with that"

Aruna felt terrible. "It's all right, Attayya. You don't have to think about them. You'll stay here. I thought that you might want to relax in the village for a while. Otherwise I wouldn't have agreed to your going there at all. The house has been cheerless since you left. The baby has been asking where you are and when you are coming back." Aruna made an effort to console her and make her feel better.

"As long as your children are small, you may not mind me. But once they are grown up, you won't need me anymore. Then you would probably prefer if I weren't around."

Aruna could sense how deeply Kamalamma was hurt. Lila must have behaved very crudely with her.

"Attayya, how could you believe that you are here only because of the baby? Don't you like me? Don't you like Prakasam? Don't we love you? Please, don't think of yourself as a stranger. You're not here to help us with work. You're here because you're one of us."

Kamalamma remained silent.

Aruna's heart filled with kindness and love for Kamalamma. For the first time, she understood how pitiable old age could be.

Her other son and daughter-in-law had asked such a nice and accommodating person to leave. What would have happened to her if she hadn't been welcome here?

The sons are financially well off. They might give her

money to take care of her needs. But how degrading it would be to have to look for that help knowing that it was given grudgingly.

On top of that, she might have had to live alone. How difficult old age could be!

She would make sure that Kamalamma would not have any difficulty here. She would make her feel that she is treated well for her own sake, not just because she helps with the baby. Kamalamma should feel that this is her house and that she has complete freedom here.

Looks like there are hurdles to women's freedom at every stage in life! It is a never-ending slavery...

Aruna was lost in thought.

Prakasam came in asking, "Amma, how about giving me some food?"

"Why, did you fight again? That's the only time you ask me to serve." Kamalamma laughed heartily for the first time since coming from the village.

"It has been a long time since you've given him lunch. Why don't you serve him. I'll go and give a bath to the baby." Aruna took the baby to the bathroom.

From the bathroom Aruna was listening to the conversation between mother and son.

He was talking as if nothing had happened. For him, the whole incident was a trivial thing. But for her, it was a matter of protecting her self-respect and individuality.

How different the two of them are! Will this difference persist? Somehow, she must find a way to eliminate this difference in their attitudes. Otherwise, she'll lose her peace of mind. She has to find a way.

She was dressing the baby. Prakasam was getting ready to go out. He said, "Aruna, I'll be back soon." She looked up at him.

He looked at her smiling. She smiled at him quite involuntarily.

His face brightened. He took the baby, tossed her up in the air, caught and kissed her. He gave her to Aruna and

went out feeling very happy.

Aruna felt restless. She took a bath, then sat with Kamalamma and talked for a while. After lunch, she felt very sleepy. The baby was lying down next to her grandmother and telling her all the new stories she had learnt.

Aruna slept till evening.

5

Ten days later, one evening when Kesavarao called on her again, Aruna found that she could not invite him into the house as freely as she had done earlier.

Although there was no chance of his knowing what had transpired between her and Prakasam, she felt as ahsamed as if he had known, and asked him to come in only with great hesitation.

Kesavarao returned her copy of *The Doll's House*.

Aruna felt elated when she saw it. She asked him enthusiastically, "Did you like it?"

"Yes, it was okay," said Kesavarao without much interest.

"Okay? That's all? You didn't think it was great?" Aruna was quite surprised at his unenthusiastic response.

Kesavarao just smiled.

Aruna was disappointed that he hadn't appreciated such a great play. Then suddenly a question entered her mind, "Do I have right to like this play?" The thought made her feel guilty.

"Is your husband home? I thought I might finally have a chance to meet him if I came at this time in the evening."

"He's home, he's just taking a bath. Can I get you some water?"

"Yes, please."

Aruna brought him a glass of water. The baby was sitting in Kesavarao's lap trying alternately to grab his pen from his pocket and his glasses.

Aruna cautioned him, "We are not responsible if anything happen to your glasses. You must protect them yourself."

Prakasam came into the room and Aruna introduced them to each other.

"Aruna garu seems to like reading. You also..."

Even before he finished, Prakasam said, "I'm not as crazy as her, but I read also. I used to read more before our marriage, but of late, I haven't been reading all that much. Isn't that so, Aruna?"

Aruna just smiled and so did Kesavarao.

"Usually people say that women have less free time after marriage and stop reading. In your case, it looks like the reverse is true. Aruna garu is finding time to read but you are not."

"Everything is reversed in our house. Aruna doesn't care much about the house and household work. I have to take care of everything," said Prakasam as if the burden of the family were all on his shoulders.

"You do household work also?" Kesavarao was greatly surprised.

"Neither of us has to do household work. My mother takes care of that. I'm not talking about work *per se*. But having a family involves so many things to worry about. Isn't that true? Just thinking about them is in itself a big responsibility. Aruna doesn't worry about them at all; like thinking about building a house or saving some money or getting things we need in the house. She doesn't care about such things at all."

Aruna's face turned pale. Was Prakasam trying to imply to Kesavarao that she was wasting that hundred Rupees?

"Well, you seem to be taking care of everything. Why not let her enjoy reading her books?" Kesavarao felt very uncomfortable saying that. He wasn't sure whether Prakasam was joking or seriously complaining about Aruna.

"How is your magazine coming along?" asked Prakasam.

"The first issue is scheduled to be out on the first of July. We're actually trying to get it out some time in the last

week of June. A few of us went around the city gathering information on children working in factories and the difficulties they face. All this will come out in the first issue."

Kesavarao spoke very enthusiastically.

"You think it will make any difference? Will their lives change because of this? I doubt we can change anything." Prakasam sounded very unsupportive.

"Not that we can change things, but we just want to bring the facts into public awareness." Kesavarao curbed his enthusiasm as he noticed Prakasam's attitude.

"I'm tired of hearing time and again that we can't do anything to change things. It's better to do whatever we can. That's better than hiding behind the excuse that whatever we do isn't going to change things." Aruna spoke her mind to the delight of Kesavarao. Prakasam cringed.

"Well, I guess you should go ahead, and we'll all see how it works," said Prakasam with a forced smile on his face.

Kesavarao stood up, said goodbye to them both, and left.

Prakasam went out a few minutes later.

* * * *

"Aruna, how long must you read? Come here. You keep reading past midnight every night. You don't get enough sleep." Prakasam called, rolling towards her on the bed.

"I don't read every night," Aruna said, still continuing to read.

"Whenever you have a book, you do."

"I don't need to stay up late to read. You take care of all the household responsibilities, and Attayya does all the work. I have lots of free time and no work; all I do is sit around and happily read books." Aruna closed the book and put it down.

"Oh! So now you're angry. I just said it in fun and you took it so seriously! Is that why you haven't been talking with me for two days?"

"If you've known for two days that I was upset, how come you haven't asked me what was wrong?"

"Come on, don't start nagging again. What did I say that was so bad? All I said was that you don't have any worries and responsibilities. And I said that for fun. That's all. I didn't scream at you and I didn't beat you. Did I?"

"Your insults were worse than that. Don't I have any responsibilities? Don't I do any housework? Have I asked Attayya to do any work other than cutting vegetables, and making tea and snacks? I wash the clothes, I wash the dishes and I clean the house and mop it. Except for that TV, we both discussed about every purchase we made. Can you please explain why you talked like that?"

"I have already said that it was just in fun."

"It may have been fun for you. You don't care how much those words hurt me. I dropped out of M. Phil. because I couldn't do housework and study at the same time. And you talked as if I had nothing to do with housework! I know why I'm getting all these insults. I'm suddenly an irresponsible person because of those hundred Rupees I wanted to give to the magazine. I have no burdens and worries because I didn't think about buying two yards of land! How can you be so blind to all the work I do?"

"Say whatever you like. It's fine with me if that's the way you think. As far as I'm concerned, I just said it in fun. You're going to give the money anyway even if I did think you shouldn't. It's not as if you cared about my feelings."

Aruna was too angry to say any more. His last statement was ample evidence that nothing had been said in fun. He would have been very happy even now if she had stopped her donation. He would be delighted that he had won the argument. What about her? Could she give up her ideals? Could she give up her individuality simply in order to live peacefully? What kind of peace would that be?

Wouldn't it be the peace of the living dead?"

Aruna held her aching head.

"Aruna, I've got some very good news for you. Come here," Prakasam called enticingly.

"What is it?" Aruna asked without much interest.

"Come here, I'll tell you."

She went over to Prakasam.

"In two days we're going to Mysore and Bangalore. We can travel and have fun for four days."

Aruna didn't speak.

"Why don't you ask me why we're going and what it's about?"

"You're going to tell me anyway, aren't you?"

"They give us an LTC. I never used it before to go anywhere. I thought it would be a good idea to use it now. Mother can take care of the baby. It's only for a week."

"You want to go leaving the baby and Attayya?"

"It will be more fun if just the two of us go. Have we ever gone anywhere together since we were married? After all, you got pregnant two months after our marriage."

Aruna looked at him in dismay. He said it as if it were her fault. He avoided looking at her.

"Mother herself will say that she doesn't want to come. I will take her to Tirupathi some other time."

"It might be difficult for her to take care of the baby all by herself. What if something happens?"

"Nothing will happen. You always have these unnecessary worries. The baby is healthy. What could happen to her? Don't worry. Let's go and have a good time."

He hugged her and kissed her passionately. Aruna found comfort in the familiar embrace.

When she was told of their plans to travel to Bangalore, Kamamma did not object, but she also did not express any enthusiasm for their trip. Her indifference concerned Aruna. She felt guilty that she hadn't asked her to join them. But Prakasam was enthusiastically making plans for

just the two of them and she didn't know what she could do.

* * * *

Early on a Sunday morning, Aruna and Prakasam's tour bus arrived in Bangalore. As they emerged from the bus, auto and taxi drivers swarmed around them.

"There must be hotels near the bus stop. We'll certainly see them if we walk a bit. Since we don't speak the local language, the auto fellows will cheat us and take us too far." Prakasam lead her towards the main road.

"We don't know this city. How far can we walk looking for hotels, specially carrying these suit cases. They may cheat us out of ten Rupees at most; isn't this too much trouble for ten Rupees?" The suitcase was too heavy for Aruna.

"Come on, just walk a little bit. I'm sure we'll find a hotel in less than ten minutes. People build hotels near railways stations and bus stops," Prakasam explained this business secret to Aruna.

After a few steps, they did see the hotels.

"You sure knew what you were talking about! Which hotel are we going to?" Aruna was thrilled that they found the hotels without walking for too long.

"No no, these hotels so near the bus stop won't be as good. We should go a little farther to find better ones. I promise you we'll be in a hotel room in less than ten minutes," Prakasam assured her.

Just as he had predicted, they saw a larger hotel in just a few minutes. Prakasam found it difficult to carry the suitcase any longer to look for other hotels, so they walked to the hotel counter.

"Do you have any rooms available?" asked Prakasam.

"Please take a seat, Sir, I will be with you in a second," said the desk clerk.

Prakasam and Aruna waited in the lounge. Thirty minutes went by and the clerk still hadn't called them.

"Are they asking us to live in this lounge or what? Go

and find out." Aruna was annoyed.

Prakasam went to the counter, waited for another half an hour, filled out all the forms they gave him, signed all the papers, paid what they asked him to pay and came back beaming with pride showing the key to their room.

A hotel boy offered to carry the suitcases. Prakasam was thankful. They walked up the endless stairs behind the boy.

As they reached the fourth floor, Aruna begged Prakasam, "I can't go one step further. Ask them to give us a room on this floor."

Quite to their surprise, the bell boy didn't take them to the next floor. They were grateful. The boy walked to the last room in that corridor, opened the door for them, brought the luggage inside and left.

"At least the room is very good," said Prakasam looking around the room.

The room was big. It had two beds. A table and two chairs were in the middle of the room, a flower vase with fresh white flowers was on the table, there was another small table between the beds with a radio and a phone easily accessible from both sides, and big windows with light coloured curtains. All in all the room was very nice.

"Prakasam, we get hot water also, there is even a shower!" Aruna was excited like a little girl.

"Of course, why not, for ten Rupees a bucket." Prakasam said indifferently.

"What?" Aruna didn't quite understand what he was saying.

"What do you think they charge for this room?"

"Tell me, how much?" Aruna was very curious.

"Guess how much"

"Fifty Rupees?" Aruna looked around the room.

"Not a chance! A hundred and fifty Rupees."

"My God!" said Aruna raising her hands to her chest.

"Why did we come to such an expensive hotel?"

"I didn't think it would be so much. We waited there for so long, I filled all those papers, and when he asked me to give five hundred Rupees as advance, I was surprised. That was when I asked him about the room rate. 'Hundred and fifty,' he said. I felt too ashamed to back down at that stage. Use four or five buckets of hot water for your bath. We should get a hundred and fifty Rupees worth of use out of this room."

Aruna couldn't help laughing aloud at Prakasam's words. "You were afraid that the auto fellow would cheat us. At least he might have taken us to a hotel we could afford."

"It's okay, Aruna. At least we have a beautiful room where we can spend time together. Why worry about money now. In fact, we should have gone to a hotel like this on the day we got married."

Aruna's thoughts took her back to their wedding day.

"How many difficulties we had that day! I came to your house at ten o' clock..."

"My house? Isn't it your house, too?" Prakasam interrupted.

"Your house then. Okay, our house. I came there at ten, and it took me till four o' clock to clean the house. I was so tired by the time I was finished with the sweeping and mopping."

"Yes. I felt sorry for you. You should have been dressed like a bride looking beautiful. Instead, you had so much work to do," Prakasam looked at her sympathetically.

"It's okay. Do you remember, you had nothing in that house other than your folding cot! You went to the neighbours and brought a mat that was in such a bad shape," Aruna laughed heartily.

"Of course I remember. I was going to put a blanket on the mat and you told me to burn it! I knew the blanket was a bit dirty, but did you have to curse me like that on the day of our marriage?" He pretended to be angry for what she had said so long ago.

"I couldn't sleep at all on that torn mat. My eyes were burning the next day. My body ached. What a start for our married life!" Aruna felt nostalgic and didn't want to leave the memories of those first few days.

"If we had been as smart back then, we could have had a memorable day."

"No. Not at all. I like our marriage day just as it was," Aruna said tantalisingly.

"Okay, go and take your bath quickly, then we'll go out. It's a pity we paid so much for the room, and then have to keep it locked most of the day," Prakasam was annoyed.

They visited the Viswessarayya Museum.

"Uma used to like this museum a lot," said Aruna.

"You didn't like it?"

"Not that I didn't, but for her, it used to fill her heart. I somehow don't feel such an attachment to science and machines. I do feel happy that I learn about new things, but that's all."

They visited Lalbagh. Aruna was wide-eyed looking at all the beautiful flowers in their many wonderful colours. Prakasam put his arm around her, drew her closer and asked, "Is your heart contented now?"

"Yes, it is, completely," Aruna was ecstatic.

She wanted to talk to each and every flower.

How beautiful they are! What to do with all this beauty?

Prakasam was delighted that Aruna was so happy. "To me you're prettier than all these flowers."

Aruna laughed very sweetly.

They went to visit other places in Bangalore and returned to the hotel by eight o' clock.

They wanted to visit Mysore the next day, but could not get seats on the tourist bus. They made reservations for the following day and returned to the hotel.

"What shall we do the whole day tomorrow?" asked Prakasam.

"We can happily relax in the room."

"Sounds good to me. We should get hundred and fifty Rupees worth of use out of this room," said Prakasam.

They both laughed.

The next day they gossiped till about ten o'clock when Aruna suddenly said, "If we went to Madras instead of coming here, we wouldn't have had to sit in the hotel room. We could have gone to see Bhanumathi* or Subbalakshmi** or somebody like that."

"Can't we see them here?"

"Whom? Bhanumathi?"

"Not Bhanumathi, but some other prominent Telugu person."

"Aren't there any prominent Telugu people living in Karnataka?"

"I'm sure there must be some. Think hard, you'll remember."

Aruna thought for a while.

"Pattabhi!" she said very enthusiastically.

"Who is he?"

"You don't know Pattabhi? He wrote *Fidel raagaala dozen*; he made the movie *Samskara*. Didn't you read *Fidel raagaala dozen*?"

"No."

"You can read it after we go back to Hyderabad. Shall we go and see him?" asked Aruna very enthusiastically.

"We don't know where he lives, how are we going to find him in this great city?" Prakasam was not so excited about visiting Pattabhi.

"We don't know his address, but he probably has a phone. Let us find his phone number," Aruna opened the phone book.

They both looked in the phone book and found the number.

* Telugu film actress and singer

** a Tamil singer of south Indian classical Karnatic music.

They called the number hoping to get the address, but could not connect. The receptionist said that the phone wasn't working.

"I don't think we can find his house from the address in the phone book," Prakasam gave up and went to lie down on his bed.

"Well, let's try. We're not doing anything anyway. At worst, if we can't find his house, we'll at least see a little more of the town," said Aruna.

"Why don't we just lie down and sleep? Why do we have to go and listen to his ragas now?"

"Sleep? We can sleep in Hyderabad. Why come all the way here just to sleep?"

"So we have to go?"

"Yes."

Prakasam got up and got ready.

They inquired at the hotel desk how to go about finding the address given in the phone book. Travelling in all kinds of vehicles, they finally reached the correct street and looking at the numbers on the houses and names of the occupants, they eventually found the address. Sadly, the house was padlocked. Prakasam looked at Aruna out of the corner of his eye.

"Don't say a word," said Aruna in great disappointment.

"You would have got angry if I had said I didn't want to come. See what happened now. That is why I say you should value the words of your elders once in a while."

"Don't talk anymore. I'm already angry," said Aruna. Again travelling in various vehicles, they returned to their hotel.

"Why don't we go and see a movie?" Aruna started again.

"A Kannada movie? I'm not going." Prakasam was absolutely certain.

"I don't think it's good to be so resistant to other languages. Don't you know how many great movies were

made in Kannada?"

"I know. But I'm not in the mood to see a great movie right now."

"So, what are you in the mood for then?"

"Just to lay my head in your lap like this and talk."

Prakasam was smiling and looking into Aruna's eyes.

"Prakasam, do you really love me?" Aruna asked unexpectedly.

"Love? No no. I don't love you. Who said that I love you?"

"Come on, Prakasam, tell me, don't joke now."

"What shall I tell you? You and your foolish questions," Prakasam tapped gently on her head.

"Then why do you hurt me sometimes?"

"I don't know. I guess I get angry when you do things that I don't like as if I don't exist. You have no worldly sense at all. Sometimes I wonder why you don't even ask my advice before deciding on things. I get the feeling that you don't care about me and that makes me very angry. You needn't take my anger so seriously, but why don't you ever try to please me when I'm angry? All you do is go into your shell and aggravate the situation," Prakasam said sadly.

"You said that my parents were right in imposing control on me. I can't tell you how much that hurt me. Even now, when I think of it, I feel so bitter. I feel helplessly sad and wonder whether you really do love me."

"Don't think of that now and ruin your mood. In my anger I say something foolish and you cling to my words forever. Don't you know how much I love you, you silly girl." Prakasam suddenly tightened his embrace.

"What is love?" She looked into his eyes, searching for an answer.

"Hm. It is this." He passionately kissed her lips, eyes and cheeks.

Aruna found herself breathless in his arms. Still, there was a flicker of a doubt in the back of her mind. Is this all

that love means?

The next morning, they got on the tourist bus going to Mysore.

Looking at the passing scenery through the window, Aruna said, "Isn't Karnataka beautiful?"

"I somehow like our state better."

"Why don't you leave your parochial attitude behind and see how green this place is! Do you really think that our area is as green?"

"How much of our Andhra did you see? You think only Hyderabad is Andhra. It would be a good idea for us to see all the beautiful places in our own state before passing judgments on other states." Prakasam put up a spirited defense of his beloved home state.

"You're right. I haven't seen much of Andhra. I didn't visit Sagar even though it isn't all that far from Hyderabad. My parents never sent me on any of those picnics or excursions," admitted Aruna.

"From now on we should visit at least one place every year."

"Look...look how beautiful that tree is.." Aruna called his attention to a flower laden tree as the bus drove rapidly past it.

They stopped at the temple in Srirangapatnam. Aruna didn't feel like coming out of the temple at all. "If temples are like this, they do inspire devotion," she said.

The bus driver announced that their thirty minutes were up and it was time to leave.

"We should not come in tourist buses. It would be better to visit just one place each day." Aruna just didn't feel like leaving the temple.

"Well, who has so much time?" said Prakasam.

Aruna was delighted with the scenery as the bus continued up the Chamundi Hills. Just as they turned on one of the bends in the road, a breathtaking valley appeared below them. Aruna wished she could go into the valley and wander.

At the art gallery they were again given only thirty minutes. Aruna could not bring herself to leave the place. There were so many beautiful paintings to see. She thought that it wouldn't be such a bad idea if they missed the tourist bus and stayed at the art gallery till evening. They could return to Bangalore the next day.

Ravi Varma's paintings especially attracted her attention. She stood in front of each one, looking carefully at the details.

"Come on, we don't have so much time for each painting. The bus will leave soon." Prakasam hurried her.

"Ravi Varma's paintings too are good," she said as if the thought suddenly struck her. Prakasam couldn't make sense of that comment.

"What do you mean? Of course they're good. What a wise comment! as if you have stumbled upon a great truth" Prakasam teased her.

"You don't understand," she said with a heavy heart.

"What is it I don't understand. What are you trying to say about Ravi Varma's paintings?"

"I just like them so much. I am wondering why Gurajada* didn't like them and why he said what he did about them."

"Did Gurajada tell you that he didn't like Ravi Varma's paintings?"

"Prakasam!" She was impatient. "That's a stupid remark. Of course he didn't tell me. Recently I read Gurajada's diaries in the library. He was critical of Ravi Varma's paintings. I wonder why? To me they seem wonderful!"

"You can ask him later. Let's go now." Prakasam wanted to buy a souvenir at the gift shop before getting on the bus again.

They selected a sandalwood figure of Radha-Krishna and paid for it.

By evening, the bus reached Brindavan gardens.

"Isn't it simply beautiful!" Prakasam was overjoyed

looking at the garden lit by a dazzling array of coloured lights.

"You are talking as if you never saw it before," said Aruna.

"What do you mean-'as if'? I never have seen it before. Have you?"

"Haven't we seen it in almost every movie? In the movie we saw just the other day, the hero was doing his dance routine around this particular fountain, I believe."

"Oh, that. I see," laughed Prakasam.

They walked around the garden and climbed up the steps to the top of the dam. By the time the bus was ready to leave for Bangalore they were exhausted. It was almost midnight when they reached the hotel. The restaurant was closed.

Prakasam complained that he was hungry, but he quickly fell asleep. Aruna was hungry too, but she couldn't get to sleep right away. She kept tossing and turning in the bed. Suddenly she remembered the valley she had seen from the bus earlier in the day as they were going up the Chamundi Hills. How beautiful it was!

For some reason the thought of the valley made her feel lonely. Prakasam was sleeping soundly right next to her.

Does the valley feel lonely? Does it think deeply in silence?

Aruna found her own thoughts strange! Prakasam is next to her. How can she be lonely? How can the valley be lonely? There are so many birds, other animals and people...

But somewhere in her mind, there is a streak of loneliness.

She is yearning for some communication from somewhere.

What is it?

Why does she feel this way?

Nobody thinks of a valley being lonely. Why did she think that way?

* Telugu writer and satirist.

She has the baby, Prakasam and Kamalamma. Why then this feeling of loneliness?

It was dawn before she could break away from these thoughts.

They went to the bus stand in the morning and booked tickets for the evening bus. They went around the city one more time, bought some toys and a chain for the baby, and sarees for Kamalamma and Aruna. Prakasam didn't get anything for himself.

Sitting in the bus that evening, Prakasam said with a smile, "Except for the hotel bill, everything else was wonderful." Aruna took his hand in hers. She had a feeling of great satisfaction. 'It has been a wonderful trip!'

6

After her return from Bangalore, Aruna talked to the baby for a while and slept off her tiredness.

It was about six o' clock when she woke up.

The heat had subsided and the evening breeze was cool and pleasant. Prakasam stood at the gate with the baby in his arms. Aruna made tea for everybody. She gave a cup to Kamalamma and another to Prakasam and sat down in the hall with her cup.

Kamalamma remembered that Aruna had received some mail while she was away. She went in and brought an envelope and a magazine and gave them to Aruna.

The magazine was *Velugu* and the letter was from Uma.

Aruna turned the pages of *Velugu* with great interest. The sixteen page magazine had many photos and several articles on illegal child labor. The articles provided details about the difficult and dangerous jobs children did in the city's factories

Under the title "Papam, punyam, prapancha margam Kashtam, saukhyam, sleshardhalu Emi erugani poovullaraa Eidaredula Paapallaaraa*" were a series of photographs depicting the children doing difficult jobs. Looking at the pictures, Aruna was pained.

"Your magazine?" asked Prakasam sarcastically.

Aruna ignored the sarcasm and said, "Yes, look at it, it's really very good." She handed it to Prakasam.

* 'bad deeds, good deeds, ways of the world, pains, pleasures, double meanings, you are oblivious to them, you innocent little flowers, five and six year old children' from a poem written by Sri Sri, a well-known Telugu revolutionary poet

"I'm sure you found it good before you even read it!" Prakasam turned the pages.

Aruna opened Uma's letter.

"Aruna,

It has been a long time since I wrote to you.

My work on the thesis is finally over. It was quite hectic and I didn't find time to write to you.

I'm almost sure of getting a job in my department, so, at this time, I have no immediate plans to come down south.

My parents came here to see me and made a lot of fuss about marriage. I told them I have no plans to marry now, and when I do, I will marry somebody I like without telling anybody and without a big ceremony.

They didn't object to my marrying somebody I like, but insisted that the marriage be celebrated in a formal fashion.

With thesis work on the one hand, and these arguments with my parents on the other, those days were extremely tense. They left me quite dissatisfied and unhappy.

I felt bad that I caused them so much pain, But I couldn't help it. Because... I'm already married!

Surprised?

Well, it isn't a traditional marriage.

Sudhir and I have been living together for about six months. I didn't make it a point to announce it to anybody.

I met him in Delhi. He is a lecturer in the English department. Our friendship gradually turned into love. We became one. We didn't think it was necessary to announce this as a marriage to everybody and get their approval.

We're not little kids anyway. If it hadn't been for the hectic time with the thesis, I could have told my parents about it. But I was certain that they wouldn't understand. Besides, they would have been very upset and it all would have caused a lot of tension for me during those difficult

days. I'll probably be going home in about four months. I'll tell them then.

During the ten days they were here Sudhir was busy with something and didn't come to my room. You're wondering, I know. Yes, we have our separate houses. When we feel like being together we meet at my place or his. Otherwise, we live in our own places, doing our own things. As long as we can continue like this, we will. When we decide to live in one place, we will. But right now, we're both too busy for that.

True, this is quite an unusual arrangement. But we find it quite natural and very satisfactory.

Write to me what you think. Tell me what Prakasam says.

Why don't the two of you come to Delhi?

Sudhir and I want to visit the places in and around here. When we can get some free time, I'll write to you. If you both come, all four of us can go on a trip and have a good time.

How is your baby?

I'm eager to hear what you think of my life.

Write to me soon."

Aruna sat in silence with the letter in her hand. Prakasam put the magazine down, and was surprised by the expression on Aruna's face.

"Aruna, what happened?"

Aruna handed the letter to Prakasam. Prakasam read the letter and said, "Chee," in great disgust.

"What's the matter?" asked Aruna very sharply.

"What else? Your friend's accomplishments!"

"What's so disgusting about it? She is living with the person she loves. What's wrong with that?"

"Love? Don't use that word. If she loves him, she should marry him. They're not married. They're not living in one place. They didn't tell anybody about it. What do you call this? It's certainly not marriage. Call it infatuation. Now they're deeply in it. In a few months, they'll get over

it and then she'll be looking for another man."

His disgust was palpable.

"Why do you talk so harshly about them?" Aruna was a bit annoyed by his attitude.

"Okay, so you tell me what to think of them."

Aruna didn't say anything.

"Why don't you argue that your friend has done something excellent?"

"Excellent or not, she is living with a man whom she loves. Isn't that what we did?"

"Why don't they marry then? Why not? Don't compare them with us. We're legally married. We didn't keep it a secret. We're living as a family. What are their objections to marriage and living together? Tell me. I don't understand. Maybe you do." Prakasam was sarcastic.

Aruna was silent. In fact, she didn't understand their reasons either. Why didn't Uma get married formally? Why don't they live together in one house? Uma is certainly not a foolish girl. She is not some one who would go around sleeping with anybody out of momentary attraction. She is a smart woman. But she has very strong opinions. Why did she do something like this?

No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn't come up with any answers. There was only one way; she would write to Uma and ask her directly.

"What's going on? Looks like you're arguing again." Kamalamma came into the hall. From the concern and sadness written all over Aruna's face and Prakasam's victorious look, Kamalamma gathered that they certainly had an argument.

"Nothing serious. Looks like her friend loves somebody. They're not married, but she and that guy are living together." Prakasam's tone was full of ridicule.

"If they love each other and live together, what's wrong then? Isn't that marriage? What did you do?" Kamalamma brushed aside his objections.

"I can't believe you're saying that. Didn't we get

married in front of the Registrar and our friends? Didn't we inform you and all our relatives?"

"Yes, you did. But I don't believe in these paper marriages certified by Registrars. You and she decided to become husband and wife, that was the marriage. The rest of it was just a ritual we came to terms with. In the case of her friend, she decided that she doesn't need those papers. That doesn't mean they are not wife and husband, does it?"

Even Aruna was shocked at what Kamalamma said. How clearly she explains things that even I was having a problem with! What a great human being she is! thought Aruna. She kept staring at Kamalamma in tremendous admiration. Prakasam was outraged.

"Mother, you don't know what you're talking about; they're not even living in one house. They're living in separate houses and when they want, they come together and pretend they're a couple." His voice expressed ridicule, disgust and even hatred.

"Living like a cat and a rat under one roof doesn't make a marriage either. It's not so bad to live separately. Anyhow, it's their life; they'll live the way they want. Why is it your concern, anyway?"

Aruna's face brightened and Prakasam cringed.

"You and your daughter-in-law are out of your minds," said Prakasam in disgust.

"Aruna, go and fry the okra. The baby is hungry. If you eat early and get to sleep early, it will be good for both of us." Kamalamma took the baby from Aruna and went into the front yard.

That night Aruna wrote to Uma telling her about everything. She expressed all her doubts and fears. After writing the letter she felt much better, having transferred all of her burden back to Uma.

Prakasam saw her writing the letter and said, "Make sure you show me your friend's reply."

Aruna knew that he would only ridicule Uma more.

She certainly wouldn't show him the letter.

The much anticipated reply from Uma did not come. The Summer holidays ended and the college reopened. *Velugu* came out regularly. Aruna continued to give a hundred Rupees a month to the magazine. A couple of months later, Uma's letter arrived.

After reading just a couple of lines, it became clear to Aruna that Uma had never received her letter. She was very surprised.

Uma wrote that she couldn't understand why Aruna hadn't replied to her letter.

"Were you offended by what I wrote? Were you angry? But I thought we were friends and that you could write to me on whatever you think without hesitation. Even if you didn't approve of the way I lived, couldn't we live our lives the way we want and still remain friends? I'm plagued by the thought that my letter damaged our friendship. Please do write to me." Uma was obviously very concerned and hurt.

Why didn't she get my letter?

Did Prakasam mail it at all?

A very unpleasant doubt cropped up.

During the holidays Aruna had rarely left the house. She had given the letter to Prakasam to mail. Did he mail it?

Quite a few times, Prakasam had asked if Uma had replied. When she said that she hadn't, he said insinuatingly. "I'm not surprised. You asked her questions for which she has no answers. So she decided to remain silent."

Did Prakasam do that because he didn't like Uma's behavior? She asked him about it as soon as he came home.

"Did you mail the letter I wrote to Uma?"

"Yes, I did. Why are you asking me about it now?" Prakasam was surprised.

"I got a letter from her today. She never got my letter."

"It must have been lost in the mail," he said quite casually.

Aruna remained silent. She felt guilty for having doubted Prakasam.

When she wrote to Uma again, she didn't raise any of the questions she had raised in the previous letter. She wrote that Uma's lifestyle was perfectly acceptable to her. It seemed more important to tell Uma that their friendship was on solid ground.

* * * *

The students went on strike that day protesting against the poor conditions and lack of equipment in the laboratories. Since she didn't have a class, Aruna sat in the library reading a book.

"Aruna garu," Kesavarao called her name softly.

"Please, please come and sit down." Aruna pointed to the chair opposite her.

"I came to talk to you about something important."

"I know. You never come to talk unless there is something important," said Aruna with a smile. Kesavarao laughed.

"What is it?"

"Do you like the magazine?"

"It deserves the name-*Velugu*. It is bringing a lot of things to light. How are the sales?"

"Not bad at all. In four months, it will be a year old. I firmly believe that the magazine can support itself after that."

Kesavarao remained silent for a few moments.

"I feel that you shouldn't just be a subscriber of the magazine. You can do more for it."

"What can I do?" Aruna was surprised and curious.

"Right now the decisions about what should be reported, how the information should be collected, how it should be presented in the magazine—all these decisions are being made by fifteen of us. I think it would be good if you joined us."

"What can I do?" Aruna asked with great hesitation.

"You can do a lot. For the next issue, we are thinking of telling the story of the women who work in the electronics

industry. To collect the information, and particularly to interview the workers, it would help if other women talked to them. Then they may talk more openly. Only two out of our fifteen are women and they are only students. I think it would be extremely useful if you could join them in interviewing the women workers."

Having said that, Kesavarao felt like he had successfully completed his assignment.

Aruna wasn't sure what to say. "I'm not sure how I can help," she said again with hesitation and uncertainty.

"Let's all meet tomorrow evening and talk about it," said Kesavarao.

"Where?"

"At a friend's place. After classes, we both can go together. It's very important that you join us."

"I'm not sure I can come tomorrow," said Aruna feeling uncomfortable.

"Please try. At least come to one meeting. Then if it turns out that it's difficult for you to come for future meetings, you can drop out."

Aruna felt that it wouldn't be wise to appear so hesitant. She agreed.

The tension started mounting that evening.

Should she talk to Prakasam and get his approval before hand?

Should she just go to the meeting and worry about the inevitable argument with Prakasam later?

She was uncertain.

Suddenly she remembered an event of many years ago.

She was in the first year of Intermediate. That day they had finished their last exam. Sankranti holidays were about to begin. All her friends had decided that right after the exam they would go together and see the movie *Devadasu*.

Some had permission from their parents. Other decided to go without permission. Aruna knew that she wouldn't be allowed to go if she asked for permission. She was generally allowed to see only those movies approved by

the whole family. And she could go only with them.

If she asked them for permission to see *Devadasu*, they would have certainly refused. There was no possibility that they would relent even if she begged them.

For the first time, she decided to go to the movie without permission. Usually she came home at one o'clock after an exam. She didn't know how she was going to explain her coming home at six o'clock that day. She kept thinking about possible alibis. Although she was in the movie theater with her friends, her mind was preoccupied with searching for good excuses to give her parents. She didn't see much of the movie. But she was afraid of leaving early for fear that her friends would make fun of her.

As soon as she arrived home, Kanakamma started the interrogation. Aruna told the truth. Everybody in the family expressed their lack of confidence in her behavior and character. Her father slapped her on both cheeks repeatedly.

Aruna remembered every detail of that day. Today the thought of going to the meeting caused as much anxiety as the thought of going to the movie had caused then. That day she was sixteen years old, still a minor, and didn't know any better.

Today, she is past twenty five. Voted in two general elections. Mother of a three year old daughter. A responsible lecturer. And a wage earner.

Still she can't make a decision on going to a meeting.

She is afraid that her guardian will get angry!

She is not afraid of making decisions about household matters. But when it comes to matters outside, Prakasam is trying to control her. Somehow she is being coerced into accepting this control.

Aruna got a headache with all these thoughts.

Why such thoughts?

She considers telling him nicely. She will convince him. In a family it is normal for the wife and husband to disagree with one other, to make compromises, and even

to cease doing things the other dislikes.

If Prakasam really disapproves, she wouldn't go to the meeting.

These meetings are not more important to her than Prakasam's love.

But if she asks him in a nice way, he probably won't object. If she tells him that it's important to her, he's likely to understand.

She took a long bath in cold water to cool her brain. She put on a soft white saree and dressed up beautifully. All the while, she was questioning herself.

She served dinner and cracked jokes. He delighted her in his embrace. After so many days, he finally saw her in a good mood. It made him very happy.

They gossiped. Reminisced about the early days of their marriage. The baby filled them with joy. They talked of the bright future.

Just before retiring to bed, Aruna asked him gently, "Could you come home a little early from the office tomorrow."

"Why? Are you making some plan?" Prakasam was delighted. He drew her closer into his arms.

"It's my plan. I need you to come early to take care of the baby. I'll be late."

"How come you're making plans without me?"

"It's a meeting."

"Meeting?"

"Yes. Remember the magazine, *Velugu*? They've called a meeting to discuss future issues of the magazine and they invited me. I'd like to go." She made the request with her face hidden under his chin. She felt like a little kid.

Prakasam turned on the bed. Aruna moved back a little.

"Are you still crazy about that magazine?" His tone was filled with disappointment.

"Why do you say 'crazy'?"

"What else is it then? Those people who have nothing

better to do... you're giving them a hundred Rupees a month. I somehow compromised on that. Now these meetings?"

"What's so bad about the meetings?"

"What would happen if you don't go to these meetings?" he retorted.

"I would feel very dissatisfied. It would hurt me if I couldn't go and learn things that I don't know about. And I would begin to hate my condition if I couldn't do something that means so much to me." Though Aruna was telling him this, she felt that she was also explaining it to herself.

"I don't know what to tell you. I don't like it. But your self esteem is hurt if you can't do something because I don't like it. You'll go to these meetings anyway. How did our marriage turn out to be like this?"

"Why do you object to my going to a meeting?"

"Our life will become turbulent. I don't like external unrelated matters coming into our life. You, me, the children, our house... and a life without wants, that's what I want. The children and I should be your life. You should be the focus of mine. That's all. I don't want you to have any relationship with things that are unrelated to me. In turn, I'll have nothing to do with things unrelated to you. Please listen to me. Stay away from these meetings." Prakasam made an earnest appeal.

"If that's the way you feel, why don't you come to the meeting, too? Then, it won't be unrelated to you."

"I simply don't like your going there. Why would I go? There are millions of injustices going on in the world, I agree. But I'm not responsible for them. I don't want to have anything to do with them. I don't want to get involved with them and destroy my life. I want to live in peace"

Aruna remained silent.

"All this love you showed me today... was it all because of the meeting?" Prakasam asked resentfully.

Aruna was startled.

Prakasam turned to the other side.

Aruna wished that she could just disappear.

Wasn't that the truth? She thought of pleasing Prakasam in order to persuade him. Why did she do that? What would have happened if she had directly discussed it with him? How foolishly she had behaved! How shameful! Prakasam finally had said what she never thought she would hear him say. But... wasn't this the same Prakasam who told her a while ago that pleasing him would help to convince him? When he said that, she thought it would be shameful to do such a thing. But she reconciled herself to it by saying that it would be normal for a wife and husband to try to convince one other in an agreeable manner. But today, she pleased him and in return.. she was insulted.

What should she do?

How should she behave?

Whichever way she behaves, it turns out to be wrong! Is there a basic flaw somewhere in her thinking?

What did Prakasam say? He didn't want her to have anything to do with things unrelated to him.

What about her? Does she need a life beyond Prakasam's interests?

She wants Prakasam.

But she also wants other things.

Suppose he doesn't want to be associated with such things?

Does her entire life belong to him? Does she have a life of her own? That is the central question.

Should everything in her life be tied to his interests? Shouldn't she have interests of her own?

He can ask about her interests. He can share in them if he likes. He can encourage her. But, does he have a right to suppress them?

She didn't give her parents the opportunity to suppress her. Should she let Prakasam control her? If she allowed him to do that, wouldn't she become a bird in a cage? Wouldn't her much cherished independence end?

Her head felt as if it was on fire. She held it in both hands and hid her face under the pillow.

The next day, right after classes, Aruna went to the meeting with Kesavarao.

The meeting was held in the home of someone called Krishnamurthy. The whole house was a single large room. That was the only room on the second floor of the building and so the atmosphere was very quiet and pleasant.

There were books and cigarette butts all over the place. All fifteen of them sat on a mat and two blankets.

Kesavarao introduced Aruna to everybody.

The two women in the group, Sujatha and Bharati, were students in the women's college. Four of the men were also students. The rest were employed. While introducing Aruna to them, Kesavarao said that she would be helping with interviewing the women in the electronics industry. The two women students were pleased. Then Krishnamurthy talked to them about the electronics industry in India, and its importance to the nation and then discussed some other major industries. Krishnamurthy was a dynamic speaker. Aruna listened to him with great attention. She was impressed with his ability to convey so much information in such an interesting manner.

On their way back from the meeting, Aruna walked with the two other women. "Krishnamurthy garu spoke so well and touched on so many areas," she said.

"Yes. There's little that he doesn't know. He's always reading books and traveling all over the country. A great scholar. He writes most of the content of *Velugu*," said Sujatha.

"Doesn't he have a job?"

"He's a lecturer. Teaching his classes and reading books are the only two things in his world," said Bharathi.

"Isn't he married?"

"No." They both laughed.

"That explains it!" said Aruna and all three laughed.

"True. But even so, he doesn't really pay attention to

other things. Eating something when he is hungry, reading and writing are the only things that occupy his time," said Bharathi.

Aruna's thoughts wandered.

What a wonderful life he has! Eating, reading, writing, traveling—no wonder he is so knowledgeable!

Aruna recalled her typical routine.

Cleaning utensils and the house as the first order of business in the morning.

Making coffee, bathing the baby, cooking.

Quick lunch and hurrying to the college.

After returning from college, washing clothes and ironing.

Cooking again and planning things for the next day.

Going to sleep exhausted.

On days when she can't sleep right away, she reads a book. That's about the only time when she feels a bit satisfied.

Is Krishnamurthy able to do what he does because he is not married? Not really. Even married men don't have any housework. Their women do all the work.

She remembered the lawyer who lives in the house across the street. He is a very well known lawyer. People say that he is the country's best criminal lawyer. He goes to the office by six in the morning. His wife sends his breakfast to the office. He goes home for lunch just before going to court. After court, he goes to the club, finishes his engagements and comes back to his office and works there till midnight.

If you asked the man to get up in the morning, clean dishes, clean the house, take care of the children, cook and then go to court....

If you asked him to wash clothes after returning from court...

Might he realise then that there is no greater crime than imprisoning women in the house?

Aruna's thoughts turned to herself.

Could she bring herself to eat hotel food even if she

weren't married?

She hates the food in hotels.

Could she ever leave the house dirty, with things scattered all over the place?

Men seem to care less. They can live like that. How come women can't?

Even before she had ever eaten in a hotel, she knew that hotels serve bad food! How did she ever get an idea like that into her head? Who had indoctrinated her with such an idea? An idea that ensures the dedication of all her energies to household work.

How would it be if she could simply ignore things, like Krishnamurthy does?

Aruna imagined a big room. There is nobody in it besides her. There are lots of books. She is reading all day...

The bus driver announced her stop. Aruna was jolted out of her thoughts. She got down from the bus and hurriedly walked home.

The house was still, as if there was no one around. The baby came out and ran up to her. She wrapped herself in Aruna's saree and said, "Why did you come home late?"

"I came just a little bit late, but you have your grandmother at home." Aruna took the baby into her arms.

"Come home early," she said, taking her handbag.

"Why, what do I have to do?"

"Read books to me, give me food, iron the clothes..."

Aruna couldn't stop laughing!

"No. I won't do any of it. You have to do it all by yourself." Aruna spanked her playfully and got busy with her work.

Prakasam was not home. Kamamma said that he had gone out around six o'clock. Aruna gave a bath to the baby, fed her and put her to bed. There were a lot of clothes to be ironed, so she got busy doing that. Prakasam came around ten o'clock. Aruna served him dinner. He didn't speak. After dinner he went to bed without a word.

Aruna cleared things away and went in and sat on his

bed. Stroking his hair, she said, "Don't you want to ask me about the meeting?"

"I don't care."

"Why not? You said you should know about everything in my life. And I want to tell you about everything. So listen to what I have to say."

"I just don't want you to have that kind of life at all." Prakasam said harshly.

"Isn't it unfair to speak like that?" Aruna said endearingly.

"What?" "That I should not have any other life." "I should have it, and you should know about it. That is fair."

"Aruna, don't irritate me."

"Okay, I won't, but do you know anything about the electronics industry in our country?" She said in a light-hearted manner.

"Why are you bringing that up now? Are you crazy?"

"That's what we talked about today. This industry has..."

Prakasam covered his ears with his hands. Aruna broke into peals of laughter.

Prakasam was angry. He got up and went to sleep next to the baby.

That day, Aruna didn't feel worried even though Prakasam was angry. The satisfaction of having learned something new made her feel wonderful. The curiosity regarding what she was going to do for the next ten days, did not leave her even in her sleep.

* * * *

Ten days later, on a Saturday morning, Aruna left home early. It was her first day of work for the magazine. She was going to take the bus to the area of the city where most of the electronics industries were located.

Prakasam was not home, having gone to attend a friend's marriage in Vijayawada. It was a big relief for Aruna not to have Prakasam at home that morning. She

didn't have to explain to anybody what she was going to do. She didn't have to get permission. For the first time, she realised how it felt to be free of those burdens.

She took the day off from the college and started early.

At ten o' clock, after having taken several buses, she finally arrived at a place on the outskirts of the city. Sujatha and Bharathi were waiting for her at the bus stop.

It looked like the whole area was occupied by nothing but electronics and engineering companies. Aruna and her companions didn't really have a plan for what they were going to do. They decided to walk into the company which had the biggest building in the area.

The security guard stopped them. "We would like to talk to your manager. Please call him," they requested. He lead them to a visitor's room inside the building. After a while, the manager walked in. He was surprised to see three women there and inquired about the purpose of their visit in English.

"We want to collect some information on the working conditions for the women employed here and their problems," said Aruna.

"Why? Why is it your concern?" He was curious.

"We work for a magazine. We would like to write about it."

"So you are here to create problems which we don't have. Our employees don't have any problems. They work well and they are paid for it. And you can leave now." He showed them the door.

The three were disappointed.

"Judging from this, it looks like nobody will let us talk to the women. We shouldn't tell them about the magazine. Let's just say that we're from the university, and that we're writing a research paper on the industry. We'll tell them that we came to collect first-hand information. I'm sure they won't turn us down."

Bharathi said that with great confidence.

"My brother wrote an article a while ago on industrial

relations. That was what he said when he visited different factories and it seemed to work well for him." She backed up her idea with this proof of success.

"Okay, let's see if it works," said Aruna, willing to experiment.

It did work. At the next company, the manager greeted them with a lot of respect, ordered tea for them, and arranged to have the employees sent one by one into the visitor's lounge where the three were seated.

Aruna had never interviewed anybody before. She was very uncomfortable doing it in the beginning, but slowly got used to it.

The jobs women did in that factory were delicate. They needed to be done with great patience and care.

In response to the question why only women were employed in that factory, they were given practically the same answer by each employee. "Women are very patient. They can sit quietly in one place for extended periods of time concentrating on a job. They can carefully engage in very delicate tasks. These qualities are the reason why women are exclusively employed in some electronics companies."

The monthly pay for daily labour between eight in the morning and five in the evening was hundred and fifty Rupees. The women worked the entire day sitting on stools that didn't even have back supports. Soldering and assembly work require great attention. Any small mistake made in the work would cost them a cut in salary. They had no idea if there were any health risks in their work. Most importantly, the women didn't even understand the question of whether the work in any way influenced their ability to bear children. Aruna was overwhelmed with all the information they collected. All three were saddened and shocked upon learning that some women were not even paid the meagre wages; some were working for just the bus fare and the midday meal.

They came from far off places to work in the factories.

They reached home very late.

They faced insurmountable problems at home.

Little children, endless housework, husbands who came home drunk,—

Aruna choked with emotion as she learnt more and more about their conditions.

The three of them even forgot about lunch. They went to three different companies and interviewed women.

At one place, one of the women asked them the feared question. "Is there any benefit for us in giving you all this information?"

"No. In fact, we came here for our own benefit. We'll earn degrees when we present all this information in a book we're writing. We'll get better jobs. Truly, we are here for our benefit, not yours," said Aruna in earnest.

The woman didn't talk after that. But she looked at them with contempt and indifference.

After all the interviews, they reached Krishnamurthy's house by evening. The rest of the group had already gathered there. Aruna told them enthusiastically about their experiences of the day. Bharathi narrated how they had told the managers that the information was for a research paper.

Aruna was hoping that the group would appreciate the effort the three women made that day. But she was surprised. The men were indifferent. They showed very little enthusiasm for their method. It was nothing unusual or original. They were more interested in the material. The women showed them the notes they had written during the interviews.

"This time it would be better if Aruna garu writes the feature article," said Krishnamurthy.

"Me? No no. I don't know how to write." Aruna was really afraid of the prospect of writing for the magazine.

Everybody laughed at Aruna's body language.

"You're a lecturer in Telugu. Why should you be afraid, like a little girl, to write a Telugu article?" asked Kesavarao.

"Well, I am a Telugu lecturer and I don't hesitate to write on Nannaya*, Tikkana* or Sri Sri*, but writing about this is different."

"I'm confident you can do it. Right now, Krishnamurthy is writing everything. It's not good for the magazine," said Subbarao.

"For the health of the magazine, I think he should continue to write." Aruna's self-denigrating humour made every one laugh.

"Jokes aside, really it is not good for one person to be writing everything in the magazine. What if Krishnamurthy comes down with some illness?" said Suryanarayana.

"Don't talk of his becoming sick just for this. I will write what I can. If you like it, fine. Otherwise you can edit it the way you want," agreed Aruna.

Everybody was satisfied with that plan.

When she reached home she found that the baby was angry that her mother had come late. Aruna cajoled her out of that mood and gave her some milk. She talked with Kamamma for a while as she was getting ready to go to the temple, gave the baby a bath, and lay down with her to read her a storybook.

After the baby fell asleep, Aruna wanted to work on her notes, but she could only stare at the books on the table. She didn't have enough energy left to get up and do any work.

Prakasam came home early in the morning the following day.

Aruna listened to the news of the wedding he had attended.

Though she was listening to him, her mind was preoccupied with the work she had done the previous day, which was unlikely to be acceptable to him. Aruna would do things against his wishes, he would get angry with her,

* Telugu poets

and they would not talk to each other for a few days. That might well become the normal pattern of their lives. Aruna was preparing herself for that kind of future.

Aruna tried to work on her notes Monday night. But Prakasam didn't let her. He kept on talking to her till eleven o' clock. Anyway Aruna was too tired mentally to concentrate.

Tuesday night, Aruna sat down with her notes.

Prakasam and the baby had fallen asleep early.

The notes were haphazardly written. Aruna tried to find a sequence in which different points could be brought out. She numbered the different points in the margins and thought of an essential outline for the article. It was eleven by then. Not used to concentrating on a single topic for such a long time, Aruna's head felt as if on fire. She was not able to make any further progress.

Holding her head in both hands, she looked at Prakasam. He was sleeping soundly.

She felt like drinking a cup of tea, but was too lethargic to get up and make it. Wouldn't it be nice if Prakasam made her one? Aruna laughed at her own whim.

If Prakasam was working on a project of great interest, would he let her sleep? Would she be sleeping? Wouldn't she make sure that he had everything he might possibly want in order to work comfortably?

But the very thought of Prakasam making her a cup of tea appeared to be exceedingly wishful thinking. Why?

She herself believed that such thinking was wishful.

How did their relationship turn out like this?

How happy would she be if Prakasam showed interest in what she liked?

Aruna let out a heavy sigh.

It would never happen.

It is a waste of time to worry about things that couldn't come true.

Aruna went into the kitchen, made herself a cup of tea, and came back to her work.

Around three o' clock the article took a definite shape. She could not sleep till then. All those notes, different points, their order, their importance were all swarming around her head. She did not remember when she slept, but woke up when the milkman knocked on the door. The baby also woke up.

Aruna was too tired but it was time for another day's routine.

At six in the evening, Aruna was talking to the baby, waiting eagerly for Prakasam who was already late.

Kamamma sat next to the baby listening to her childish warble.

The baby stopped talking and started to jump up and down claiming that she was dancing. Thanks to watching television regularly, the baby had learned to do these aerobics which she called dance. For Aruna and Kamamma, this had become regular entertainment.

"Attayya, I should take the baby for dance lessons," said Aruna, looking at the baby fondly.

"Music lessons are better," said Kamamma.

"How come?"

"If you learn dance, you have to practice it all your life. It's a lot of work... to get ready to dance in front of an audience. It's almost ritualistic. A lot of people who learn dance in childhood completely forget it when they grow up. Music is different. One can even sit alone and enjoy singing. Baby has a very nice voice. Send her for music lessons," advised Kamamma.

"Attayya, you think so deeply about everything. The society would have greatly benefited if you had had an education," said Aruna in admiration of her mother-in-law.

"If I had been educated, it probably would have been to my benefit, but I'm not sure about the society. I earned a lot of money from working the land. I don't know if I could have done any better with an education."

"No, not the money, Attayya. I meant that you could have helped a lot of people with good advice."

"Well, to give good advice, one doesn't really need education. All that one needs is a desire to help."

Aruna was about to say something, but a shout - "Aruna!" - was heard from the street.

It was Prakasam. Looking at him, Aruna and Kamamma were astonished.

"Why didn't you answer me?" he said as if he was determined to pick a fight.

"What is it?" asked Aruna. She already had an inkling of what it could be.

"Did you go to electronics factories last Saturday?"

"Yes I did."

"Why?"

"For the magazine. To write about the working conditions of the women employed there."

"A great saviour of the nation you've become! Why didn't you tell me? You do what you want anyway. At least you could have told me about it."

"You said that you didn't want to know about such things."

"I see, Now you have become a Pativratha*. I said 'don't tell me', and so you stopped; I also said 'don't go'. Why didn't you stop going to those meetings?"

"Prakasam, don't talk nonsense." Aruna was angry.

"Why are you talking so foolishly." Kamamma felt that she must intervene.

"She went to some electronics factories last Saturday. A friend of mine is managing a company there. Today he was asking me 'Your wife is a lecturer in Telugu. Why is she doing research on the electronics industry.' I had no idea. I just stood there like an idiot. I have really become an idiot in this house."

Kamamma didn't know what to say.

"Aruna, let's decide this right now. Tell me whether you're going to stop this roaming around and attend-

* a traditional and obedient wife.

ing these meetings?" He wanted a decision that very minute.

Aruna remained silent.

"Tell me. I can't put up with this nonsense anymore. Will you stop or not?"

He was threatening her like a little girl.

Aruna said gently and firmly, "I won't stop."

"You won't?" Prakasam raised his hand.

Kamamma held his raised hand. "Don't be stupid. Go away." She pushed him into the room.

Aruna picked up the baby who had had a scare and was about to cry.

"Aruna, it's not good for you to be stubborn. Why do things he doesn't approve of? Why all this trouble?"

Aruna stood there motionless.

He was going to hit her.

If he doesn't like what she does, he would scream; he would even hit her.

He would try everything in his power to stop her.

But, no matter what he does, she would not stop.

Where will all this end?

Can she love him anymore?

She can probably give up all her ideas...

She can probably obey his dictates...

She can probably live without freedom...

But she cannot love him any more.

She had never felt her heart become so heavy before.

She cried without any self restraint.

Kamamma showed her impatience with Aruna. "If you cry in front of the baby, she will be frightened. Go and give her some food." Kamamma tried to pull her up.

Aruna pulled her hand away. She told her mother-in-law. "You feed the baby." So she went into the bedroom and lay down on the baby's bed. When she went in, Prakasam came out.

Aruna cried like a person who had lost everything.

For a whole week Prakasam didn't speak to Aruna.

And she didn't make any effort to talk to him.

Both were concerned about the silence between them, but neither was willing to reopen the communication. They went about their daily routine as if nothing unusual had happened.

Prakasam was prepared to excuse Aruna if she admitted her folly. He was certain that she would eventually do so.

Aruna was indifferent to the consequences of the deep conflict between them. She thought constantly about the death of her love for Prakasam; it was all over. She thought every minute about it - not the love, but the end of it.

If he had ever loved her, it was the body he loved.

He never understood her love for independence.

He never respected her opinions and her likes.

How could she possibly love him?

What had she actually seen in him to love him in the first place?

She didn't really love Prakasam.

She was desperate for love. It was his love for her that she loved.

She knew very little about Prakasam.

She engaged in small talk with him, and went to the movies with him, but she didn't know anything about his thoughts on life.

He didn't know about her either.

They were essentially strangers to each other. They couldn't have possibly loved each other.

These thoughts continued to torture Aruna in a thousand different ways.

Aruna's article was published in *Velugu*.

She looked at it indifferently.

Prakasam would not appreciate it.

He would not understand it. He wouldn't even make an effort to understand it.

The enthusiasm she had in putting the article together, the joy she felt while working on it, the satisfaction she

enjoyed when it all came together, Prakasam would not understand any of that.

How could she love him?

The longer she thought that way, the more frustrated she became.

Though she was sitting in the library reading a book, she didn't register a word of what was in front of her.

She didn't react when she saw Kesavarao walking towards her.

He gave her a copy of *Velugu*.

"Aruna garu, this Sunday we're going to review the current issue. You'll be there, won't you?"

She didn't respond, but stared at him with blank expressionless eyes.

"Aruna garu, why are you looking like that? Are you feeling okay?"

Aruna suddenly said, "I'd like to come to your house today."

Kesavarao was shocked. Pulling himself together momentarily, he said, "Yes. Please come. We'll go together after classes" He went to his class in a hurry.

Aruna stared into the book a while longer. She wanted to think about a lot of things, but had no emotional energy left for thinking. She waited for a while after the classes had ended, but Kesavarao didn't show up. Maybe he had forgotten. After a while, Aruna got up and went home.

7

The next day Aruna hoped that Kesavarao would apologize for going home without her. But he didn't say a word. She assumed that he probably had forgotten about it.

"You said yesterday that we could go to your house together, but you left without me." She reminded him.

"Sorry, I was caught up in something else and forgot," said Kesavarao.

"It's all right. I'll come today," said Aruna.

That evening they went to Kesavarao's house in an auto. Just as they entered the house, Kesavarao called his wife. "You..look, what are you doing?"

A woman, obviously his wife, came into the hall from the kitchen.

"This is my wife." Kesavarao introduced her with a weak smile. She said, "Namaste" to Aruna.

Aruna wondered why Kesavarao didn't address his wife by name. Aruna said, "Namaste," and asked her name.

"Murali," she said very shyly.

"Beautiful name," said Aruna.

She bent her head embarrassed.

"This is Aruna. She's a lecturer in our college."

"Please sit down." She said and went into the kitchen.

After a few moments Aruna said to Kesavarao, "She is making something. Please tell her not to bother."

"It's nothing. She's probably just making some tea," said Kesavarao and then called his wife, "Look, you, come here. You can make tea later."

Aruna was surprised again by the manner in which Kesavarao addressed his wife.

"Let me see what she's doing," said Aruna. She went into the kitchen despite a mild protest from Kesavarao.

Murali felt embarrassed when Aruna walked into the kitchen. "I'm almost done. I was going to bring the tea in a minute."

"You keep your kitchen so well organised. And very clean. It's as beautiful as your drawing room." Aruna complimented her.

Kesavarao, who came into the kitchen behind Aruna, said, "That's all she knows. If she can't even keep the place clean, what good is she."

Aruna could not believe what she had heard. She turned around to look at him, but he didn't look at her.

"Let us go into the drawing room. I will bring the tea there," said Murali.

All three went back into the drawing room.

Somebody called him while they were drinking tea, and Kesavarao excused himself.

"This is the routine. He can't sit peacefully even for ten minutes," said Murali covering his tea cup with the saucer.

"He's busy doing so many good things," said Aruna appreciatively.

"What kind of good things?" inquired Murali.

Aruna was surprised by the question. But it had been asked sincerely. There was no expression of sarcasm or humour in Murali's face.

"You don't know what he does?"

"I really don't. He doesn't tell me anything."

Aruna couldn't understand this situation.

"Don't you know about the magazine? Haven't you seen the magazine- *Velugu*?"

"Magazine?"

Aruna couldn't believe her reply, but Murali again asked it quite honestly. She took the magazine out of her bag and showed it to Murali. "Haven't you seen this magazine?"

"No, I haven't."

"Didn't Kesavarao garu bring the magazine home?"

"I don't know. He puts all his papers in the bureau and locks them up. He is probably afraid the kids will misplace them."

"He is doing everything for the magazine." Aruna didn't know what else to say. After a while she asked, "Do you read books?"

"I don't get time. I don't really have the interest either. The household work, kids and making sure he has everything he needs in the morning - these things take all my time. He gets especially upset if everything isn't done properly for him in the morning."

"Does he help you with anything?"

"Well. I see you don't know much about him. He doesn't like to be anywhere near household work. Some men help with a lot of things. Not he. I have to do everything, starting with putting toothpaste on his brush in the morning. He doesn't even bring groceries from the store, but if anything is missing at home, he promptly yells at me. This morning, he was very upset that he didn't have soap in the bathroom. I told him I would put it in the afternoon, but for today he should take his bath with bath powder. That's all! He was so angry, he threw the powder on the floor, shouted at me for my carelessness, and took his bath in plain water."

Murali didn't say that in anger or frustration. She sounded quite happy and ecstatically absorbed in his behaviour.

Aruna didn't quite know what to make of it. 'Kesavarao gets mad with his wife if they run out of soap. Maybe he beats her also?' The very thought was distasteful.

Kesavarao came back to join them.

"Looks like you completely bored her," he said to his wife.

"She said that she hasn't seen our magazine?" Aruna could no longer hold back questioning him.

"She doesn't care about such things. All she knows is to sit in the kitchen all the time." Kesavarao said that quite casually.

Aruna couldn't sit there any longer. She got up to leave. "I have to go."

"Already? You haven't even seen our children."

"I forgot. Where are your children?" She was embarrassed because she had forgotten to ask about them.

"They have gone to play outside. They will be here any moment."

"I guess I'll have to see them the next time. I'm afraid I have to leave right now." Aruna came out of the drawing room to leave. Kesavarao hailed an auto, paid him in advance and said good-bye.

Quite unhappy with the events in her own home, Aruna had hoped to spend some time in the company of a happy and ideal couple.

She had gone to Kesavarao's house in the belief that he treated his wife with respect, that he and his wife discussed everything amicably, that his wife was proud of all that he was doing for the magazine, and that she would find peace and joy in their company.

What she saw there came as quite a shock.

Kesavarao has no respect for his wife whatsoever.

He doesn't even call her by name.

He addresses her as 'that' and 'this' in front of strangers.

He doesn't tell his wife anything about the things he does.

He expects her to serve him all the time.

If there is any shortcoming in her services, he yells at her.

Does he beat her also?

Aruna felt breathless with those thoughts.

How could it be?

How can a man who is so concerned about the injustices in society not think about his own wife?

Why doesn't he tell her about what he has learnt?

Why doesn't he bring her to the meetings?

If she didn't want to come, that would be quite another matter. But not to tell her about what he is doing, not to share his feelings with her, how could that be?

She remembered Kesavarao saying that it is important to learn about the other people and the world.

He wants to learn about the world, but his wife's world is limited to him. All these made her lose all respect for Kesavarao.

Prakasam wants me to have nothing to do with the outside world.

But... at least he is willing to live by the same principle and treat me and our child as his only world.

Kesavarao is worse than Prakasam. He wants involvement with the world-at-large, but denies it to his wife.

How unjust!

Aruna felt quite enraged.

Are the others also like this?

If not, why didn't they get their wives involved in the magazine?

If they could convince me to come to the meetings, couldn't they convince their wives?

Can't they at least treat their wives with respect?

Aruna felt reluctant to go to the meeting on Sunday morning.

* * * *

Saturday night while Kamalamma was preparing for the next day's breakfast, Aruna told her that she was going to another meeting. She would cook in the morning so there was no need to make any breakfast. Kamalamma grumbled. "What meetings? Lighting Ravana's Pyre* in her own house."

Prakasam could not control his anger. He threw the glass into the sink and went out. Aruna ignored his outburst.

In spite of all that, by the next morning she was not feeling enthusiastic about going to the meeting. It was unlikely that she could ever again be inspired by Kesavarao's speeches.

* Ravana's pyre: believed to be inextinguishable

He is all pretense. He is not sincere. He either does it because he likes doing it or he imagines that he is doing a great service to the nation, thereby establishing his superiority over others. It is unlikely that he does these things out of compassion. Otherwise, he wouldn't be treating his wife like that. A man who knows so much about the world, shouldn't he be treating his wife like a human being? His true nature becomes evident when it comes to his wife.

With those thoughts, Aruna finished preparing an early lunch, took a bath and fed the baby.

Prakasam asked his mother to serve him lunch. After lunch, he took a book and lay down on the sofa in the hall.

Aruna had her lunch, took the baby to bed, and read her a story till she slept. She didn't feel like going to the meeting.

Both Prakasam and Kamalamma were delighted that Aruna had stayed at home.

Prakasam felt very happy at the thought of change in Aruna.

Just imagining how happy they could be if she got over this obsession with meetings, he felt very energised. If she dropped this madness, he would treat her very well. He would love her dearly. He felt the desire to hug her, but resisted. Walking back and forth between the hall and the bedroom, he suddenly remembered something.

It was the eleventh of August. Just four days before their anniversary.

"Aruna!" he suddenly rushed into the bedroom shouting. It was a whole month since he had called her by name.

Aruna looked at him in disbelief.

Prakasam felt sorry for her.

"Aruna, today is the eleventh. It's just four days before our anniversary."

She was suddenly overwhelmed with sadness and couldn't hold back her tears. Prakasam sat down by her and tried to console her.

"Aruna, we both acted in haste. Let's stop all these

arguments. When you don't talk to me, I feel terrible. Come, get up. Please stop crying." He kissed her head and drew her closer.

She tried to get up, but he held her tight. She felt a numbness in her head. She couldn't think. Her body reacted with a jolt to his touch.

She wasn't even sure whether to feel sad or happy about the anniversary.

For about a month now she had been nourishing the thought that she didn't love him. But her body was being squeezed in his embrace. She remained silent, not knowing what to do.

The next day, Prakasam woke up very enthusiastically. Aruna didn't feel like getting up at all.

Kamalamma and Prakasam waited for her for a while, then came into the room to see her. She told them that she wasn't feeling well and went back to sleep. A little later Prakasam wrote a leave letter and had her sign it.

Aruna slept till noon. She felt dull and had cramps, but felt better after a bath. The baby had already eaten and was sleeping. Kamalamma insisted she also eat. After managing to swallow a few bites to satisfy Kamalamma, Aruna went outside to the pan shop to buy some arecanut powder. There she was surprised to see Krishnamurthy.

"Is this where you live?" he inquired.

"Yes. In this house right here. What brings you here?"

"I came to see the lawyer. I didn't realise you live in the house right across from his. So you didn't go to the college today?"

"I didn't feel well this morning, so I took the day off. Come in for a while, unless you're in a hurry." She invited him into the house.

"Why didn't you come to the meeting yesterday?" He sounded almost like he was demanding an explanation.

"I wasn't feeling well." She said as if admitting guilt.

"How are you now? Is that why you applied for leave?"

"Yes, thanks. How was the meeting yesterday?" In

spite of an inner desire to stay away from the topic, she couldn't help asking about it.

"Most of the time was spent in praising your article. You wrote very well. I used to write articles filled with facts, but you wrote it in a manner that was engaging for the readers and with genuine style. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it."

She couldn't resist feeling happy hearing Krishnamurthy's compliments. Her face brightened. All the tiredness, dejection and weakness she had been feeling since the previous day were gone and she felt a new burst of energy and strength.

Krishnamurthy praised my writing. He didn't say things merely for the sake of formality. Everybody respected his opinions. It was so satisfying that he liked her article.

"Have you decided on a topic for the next issue?" She asked the question quite naturally. Her inner resistance to the subject had evaporated!

"The Mehendi incident."

"About Mehendi? Really?" She was quite surprised.

"Yes. Didn't you read in the newspapers a couple of days ago that the police had beaten them up, so they held a protest demonstration in front of the police station? We want to go to them and find out their side of the story, then write about it."

Aruna wasn't sure what to think about going to the Mehendi women and writing about them.

Krishnamurthy had to leave. Aruna saw him off at the door.

She wanted to talk about this with somebody. But with whom? She had thought of not going to the meetings. Suddenly she remembered Kesavarao.

Is it proper to stop going to the meetings because Kesavarao doesn't treat his wife properly? With whom should I confide in about these things? Unfortunately, there is nobody to talk to. There is no point in talking with

Kesavarao. I don't know Krishnamurthy well enough. Anyway, it looks like he's beyond all these things.

How come Uma didn't reply to my letter?

I should tell Uma about all this. But it's difficult to write about so many things in a letter. I should write to her and ask her to come here for a few days so that we can discuss all my doubts and concerns. If I tell her that this is a very important matter, she'll certainly come. Come to think of it, discussing these things with Uma might be the only way I can feel at ease, she thought.

After that decision, it seemed as if a solution had been found for all her problems.

Prakasam came home in the evening with some new dress material. "It would have been better if we both had gone to buy the cloth, but I thought that you might not be quite up to it. We should have them sewn right away. We have only two days. Do you like them?"

She looked at them with indifference even though Prakasam was showing them to her very enthusiastically. He was very proud of his selections when she told him that they were all fine. The baby was very excited about getting new dresses. Aruna took her in her arms and kissed her.

"Amma, is the fever gone?" she asked.

Obviously the baby had been told that her mother wasn't feeling well and that she shouldn't bother her. She must have been wanting to come to her since morning. Aruna felt sorry for the baby.

"Yes, the fever is gone." She hugged her.

"So can you tell me a story then?" The baby was very eager and hopeful.

"Now? But I have a lot of work to do now."

"You always have work - Kamamma will do it." The three of them laughed at the baby's words.

Prakasam went to give the clothes to the tailor. Aruna lay down with the baby telling her stories.

The next day she went to the college.

Kesavarao greeted her in the corridor, but Aruna

didn't feel like conversing with him. She went and sat at her desk.

"Yesterday Kesavarao asked quite a few times why you hadn't come to work. How would I know? I told him that he was more likely to know about you than any of us." Vimalakumari laughed as if she was telling a joke. The rest of them also giggled.

Aruna knew that her colleagues cracked jokes about and ridiculed her friendship with Kesavarao. They used to stare at the two of them whenever Kesavarao came by to talk about something. They were all ears, trying to catch as much of their conversation as possible.

Aruna used to enjoy the thought that their ears would become much wider if Kesavarao came to talk to her for three or four days at a stretch. Though she tried to ignore them, sometimes she couldn't help feeling irritated by their behaviour.

At times she felt restless at the thought that her colleagues might be disparaging her good character.

She couldn't completely ignore them, and felt that she couldn't talk with Kesavarao openly knowing that her colleagues were keeping a watch on her.

Aruna had wondered often why her colleagues behaved as if they had the right to judge her and her character. It was only recently that she had realised that they had been getting that authority from her own fears and restlessness. Who are they, she thought, and what is their authority to judge her.

On top of that, she was angry with Kesavarao that day. That made the situation worse. She tried her best to conceal her anger and displeasure.

The next day, Aruna again didn't speak with Kesavarao. Coming back to the department at three o'clock after her class, she found Kesavarao, Krishnamurthy, Sujatha and Bharathi sitting around her desk. When they saw her, they all got up and went outdoors. Kesavarao led them to the shade of an Asoka tree.

"Aruna garu, have you seen today's newspaper?" asked Kesavarao.

"Yes."

"Have you read about the rape in the village just outside the city?"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow we would like you to go with these two students and interview that woman. We'll also come, but you should do the interview. I think she'll talk more freely with you."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes. Tomorrow is a holiday. It would be convenient for everybody. If we leave early, we can be back by noon. Your presence is absolutely essential. We'll write about the case and dedicate the next issue of the magazine to a general discussion of this crime."

"I can go only after ten o'clock tomorrow," said Aruna, thinking about the next day's plans.

"Let's do it after ten then. We'll wait for you at the bus stop. When you come we'll all go. I think we can be back by evening."

"Okay. I'll come to the bus stop at ten." Aruna left them and went back to her department.

Seeing her come in, her colleagues, who had been talking very enthusiastically among themselves, suddenly dispersed. They pretended to be busy with reading or other work. Aruna was agonised. There must be something wrong with her. Otherwise why would they all treat her differently and behave as if she had done something criminal.

What am I going to tell Prakasam tomorrow? It's our anniversary. The atmosphere in the house has been getting better in the last couple of days. If I tell him about this, everything will get worse.

I shouldn't tell him about it. I have to find an alibi to get out of the house. If I tell him that I have to attend a colleague's marriage, he wouldn't mind at all. I'll be back by evening anyway.

But isn't it pitiful that I have to lie.

But she couldn't think of any other way out. She knew that she would feel wretched for having to lie and that she would feel tense the whole day just thinking about it.

Why am I willing to go through all this trouble? Why can't I just quit participating in the magazine? Do any of the people in the group know how much tension the magazine causes me? They all think that I have no problems. It probably hasn't even occurred to them that I have problems. Nobody has ever even asked me. None of them are friendly enough with me to ask. We think alike on a lot of issues - yet, we're not really friendly. They somehow stay in their own circle. If they want me to do something, then they come to talk to me. That's all. They all treat me with respect, but not as a friend, not as one of them. If they treated me as a friend, I could have told them about my situation and perhaps it might have eased my burden a bit. Bharathi and Sujatha are just girls. They treat me as a teacher, and call me 'Madam.' I should tell them to stop addressing me like that. I should at least make friends with them. In spite of the fact that we think alike, the men have not accepted me as a friend, probably because I'm a woman. Isn't that an insult to me?

She felt terribly discontented.

Just as she had thought, Prakasam didn't object to her going to a colleague's wedding. She felt uncomfortable wearing a new saree to match the alibi. By the time she reached the bus stop, the rest of the group was waiting for her. The bus was about to leave. They all got in.

Aruna asked Sujatha and Bharathi, "Don't your parents object to your roaming around like this? Do they like the fact that you're doing this?"

They both laughed.

Their uninhibited laughter revealed how happy they felt that Aruna had asked them that question.

Sujatha said a bit shyly, "They don't know what we're doing. We lie to them, so we can get out of the house."

"What do you tell them?" Aruna was curious.

"That we're going to see friends, going to a movie, or that we have a lecture in the college, something like that."

Then we're all in the same boat, thought Aruna.

"So they don't mind your going to movies or seeing friends?" Aruna asked with a smile.

"They grumble a little, but eventually they let us go," said Bharathi. Aruna thought how strange it was that parents did not mind if their children went to see trash movies or if they roamed about with friends. But they would not allow them to cross the threshold to do such good work. Her own parents did not allow her to go to movies and outings.

Bharathi interrupted Aruna's thoughts. "My parents are still a lot better than the parents of some of my classmates. Their parents won't let them go anywhere other than college and home. If they are late coming home even by five minutes, they have to face an interrogation. Suja, you know Purna, don't you. Her brother is only two years older than her. I think he's doing BE. Even he tries to rule over her."

"You should hear this, Madam. Our classmate Kalyani, she used to be a good friend during our first year. We went to her house a few times. One day we wanted to go to a movie and she asked her father. He said, 'no.' The next time we went to see her, he yelled at us. He said that we were spoiling his daughter and asked us to leave. Poor Kalyani, she cried a lot. We didn't say anything to her, but she felt very ashamed. She doesn't talk with us anymore."

To Aruna, it all sounded like a replay of her own story.

"But do the men in our group know what you go through to participate in this work?"

"No."

"Why haven't you told them?"

"I don't know. They've never asked. I guess I'm afraid of saying these things to them." Sujatha said with a great deal of hesitation.

They never asked. But these girls had been coming whenever they were needed. They go through a lot of trouble to participate in this work. Since the men were unaware of their problems, they wouldn't think about arranging these meetings at a time more convenient to the girls.

And the girls never told them.

Aruna wasn't comfortable with that arrangement.

"I don't know when we're going to be independent like you, Madam. We're both thinking of finding some sort of job as soon as we finish our degrees."

Aruna smiled feebly.

They got down from the bus and walked about a kilometer to the village. It was a very small village. They inquired from someone on the road and found their way to Sangamma's house. She lived in a small mud house.

As they approached the house, they saw Sangamma's husband walk her out carrying on his shoulder. She looked very frail and withered. Seeing the visitors, he took her back in. Kesavarao told him why they had come. The poor man broke down and cried aloud. "Please talk to her. She will tell you everything. But, however much you write about it, can you undo the crime she suffered?" He was not against their writing about it, but was simply feeling helpless about what had happened. "She doesn't have the strength to stand up. The doctors in the hospital told me to take her back home. I brought her here last night. But she seems to be suffering terrible pain. I was about to take her to a small clinic nearby," he added.

"Let us go to the clinic and bring the doctor here. She is not in any shape to go anywhere," said Krishnamurthy. He and Sangamma's husband went to the clinic.

Aruna, Sujatha and Bharathi went inside the hut. Sangamma looked like a corpse lying there. The three were choked with emotion and sympathy.

Aruna went and sat next to her. Sangamma was crying silently. Neither Aruna nor the other two knew

what to say to her.

Aruna felt a sense of revulsion at herself for being there. 'She is a wounded body and soul and lying here half dead. We are here to ask questions and rake her wounds. Why? For whose benefit? Will somebody change because of this? Doesn't everybody know enough about this crime? What happened to everything that has already been written?' Aruna felt the futility of the whole exercise.

"Who committed this crime against you?" asked Sujatha.

"Dora*." Sangamma began to sob.

She replied to each of their questions, one by one. Dora had asked her to come into his house. He had pounced on her. He and his two friends had held her and raped her fifteen times. Blood flowed from her wounds. Her breasts ached. Her back felt broken. Her body was... She narrated her misfortune in detail.

Aruna wrote everything down as Sangamma spoke.

"So what are you going to do now, Sangamma?"

"What can I do? The police have refused to record the case. They said that Dora would kill me and my husband if we file a case. The hospital staff also asked us to leave. The only thing I can do is slowly sob to death."

Sangamma's misery touched Aruna as nothing ever had before. She was choking with emotion and anger, but her eyes were bone dry and burning.

I will write an exceptionally good story about this case. *Velugu* will hit the stands. Everybody will read it. The magazine will be praised. The editorial board will be proud. Krishnamurthy will say that Aruna wrote a great article. I might be thrilled at the high praise from such an intellectual. Nobody will care about Sangamma. She will slowly sob to death. She will die miserably. Her husband will go crazy. But the rest of us will live happily ever after. Aruna felt revolted by the whole prospect.

* employer/boss

"Madam, we must go," Sujatha and Bharathi dragged her out of her thoughts and out of the hut.

Aruna wished she could cry, but her eyes were dry. Her heart had become as heavy as lead. By the time she got home it was seven o' clock.

Prakasam, Kamalamma and the baby were sitting outside waiting for her.

"How come you are so late, Aruna?" asked Prakasam eagerly.

"The bus was late." She went straight into the bathroom to avoid them.

I am home now. I have to leave the realities of the external world behind. Those experiences, the pain, those tears, they should remain outside. They are not understood here.

Here I have to smile.

I have to love Prakasam.

I have to play with the baby and make her laugh.

I have to talk amicably with Kamalamma.

Aruna wished that she could cry without any inhibitions. She was very angry and wanted to curse somebody. She would have liked to take a sleeping pill and fall asleep and avoid those unrelenting painful memories of Sangamma's agony.

But she couldn't. She couldn't even tell anybody how she was feeling.

She had to pretend love, fake a smile, and act calm and gentle.

By the time she had finished her bath, Prakasam and Kamalamma had set the table for dinner.

"Dinner already?"

"I'm hungry, Aruna. I ate in the morning, but I didn't have an afternoon snack. Looks like you ate well at the wedding reception." Prakasam laughed.

"It's difficult to eat at those receptions. Look at her face. It looks dry and withdrawn. I don't think she ate anything there," said Kamalamma.

Aruna sat at the table but couldn't eat. Sangamma probably hasn't eaten. She is probably crying her heart out, she thought.

"Aruna, you're not eating at all. Are you feeling sick again?"

Aruna didn't want Kamalamma to worry about her. She ate a little and excused herself from the table saying that she had eaten late in the afternoon and wasn't really very hungry.

"Go and sleep. I'll take care of the kitchen tonight," said Kamalamma. Aruna picked up the baby and went into the room. The baby went back to the Kitchen saying that she wanted to sleep with her grandmother that day. "She will tell me a big story." She said Aruna went directly to bed and closed her eyes tightly.

Prakasam came and lay down next to her with his head on her chest. "Are you very tired?" he asked lovingly.

"Yes."

"I know how to make your tiredness vanish."

Aruna didn't speak.

"Aruna, remember how happy we were today three years ago?"

"Yes."

"Come on. Don't do this. We should be just as happy and excited today as we were then."

"I don't feel well." She tried to remove his hands.

"I'll make everything better." He held her in a tight embrace.

She suddenly remembered Sangamma's scream when Dora attacked her. Aruna jerked herself away from Prakasam.

"Aruna, you're angry with me. Right? I know I said nasty things to you and hurt you terribly. I'm sorry. Won't you forgive me?" He pulled her again close to him and pleaded with her.

"I truly feel sick. Please leave me alone today."

Prakasam paid no attention to her tiredness and the

indifference in her voice.

"Aruna, from tomorrow you can punish me however you like. But today, I can't help irritating you." He gently bit her cheek.

She remembered the wounds on Sangamma's cheeks.

She tried to push Prakasam away, but he held her tighter and kissed her lips.

"Ayyo." Sangamma's scream rang in Aruna's imagination. Her body shivered in revulsion.

Prakasam was kissing her all over. She felt a sense of numbness spreading over her.

What has just happened? Hasn't Prakasam raped me? He paid no heed to my feelings. He just satisfied his desire. He ignored my pleas. Because he's my husband, I just closed my eyes and remained silent. But that doesn't make it any less a rape. It feels so shameful when your husband violates you; how much more shameful and painful it must have been to be repeatedly violated by three brutes. How did Sangamma survive? How could Prakasam behave so crudely? Maybe every husband is like that. Maybe there are no women who haven't been raped by their husbands. Whom can I say this to? How can I talk about this? Will anybody understand it? They'll think that I'm crazy. Even if he's the husband, why should he be allowed to touch my body against my wishes? How come I couldn't stop him? Aruna felt ashamed of her helplessness.

"Aruna." Kamalamma called.

"What, Attayya." Aruna hurried out of the bedroom.

"The baby's body is very hot."

The baby was awake. Her eyes were very red. She was running a high fever.

"I will take care of her, Attayya, you go and rest now." Aruna sat next to the baby.

The fever didn't abate for a long time. The baby complained that her legs were aching. Aruna massaged her legs gently. She was seriously worried about the baby. She would take the baby to the doctor in the morning,

hoping dearly that the fever wouldn't get worse before dawn. Fortunately, it had subsided by dawn and the baby fell asleep.

Prakasam woke up and became very agitated when he learned of the baby's fever.

"Aruna, you're not well. Why didn't you wake me up? You shouldn't have stayed up all night. Go and sleep now. I'll sit with the baby."

Aruna was so exhausted that she fell asleep immediately. When she woke up a couple of hours later, Prakasam was getting ready to take the baby to the doctor.

"I'll take the baby to the doctor. I wrote a leave letter for you. If you sign it, I'll drop it at the college on my way." Prakasam gave the letter to Aruna.

Aruna read the letter. "For four days?"

"It is okay. You're not well. The baby also isn't well. Take it easy for four days. I'm also taking leave so that we can take care of the baby together."

Aruna didn't argue about it. She signed the letter. The baby had a fever that entire day, but by the end of the following day she felt better. Aruna could not think about much else besides the baby. There was no relapse on the third day. The doctor advised that she could be given solid food.

Around six o'clock in the evening, Aruna was feeding the baby. Prakasam sat next to them showing the baby pictures from a story book.

To their surprise, Kesavarao, Krishnamurthy and Sujatha walked in from the street. Aruna's face turned pale. She greeted them formally and welcomed them, but couldn't pretend to be pleased with their visit.

Prakasam also got up and greeted them.

"This is Krishnamurthy garu, a lecturer in the college. This is Sujatha. She's a student doing BA. And you know Kesavarao garu already." Aruna introduced them to Prakasam.

She knew why they had come. She still had the notes

she made at Sangamma's house. She went inside to get the notebook. Prakasam gave the baby and the food bowl to Kamalamma, and came back to sit with the guests. Aruna came out with the notebook and gave it to Krishnamurthy.

"You don't have to give us the notes. The article you wrote is all we need," said Krishnamurthy.

"Sorry. I couldn't write the article. I'm afraid you have to write it yourself."

"Oh no, we were under the impression that it would be done by now. We were going to take it for type-setting. The rest of the material is all ready."

"Sorry. I wasn't feeling well and the baby was running a fever. I'm not in a position to write it."

"Okay. We'll do something about it." Krishnamurthy stood up to leave.

Kesavarao and Sujatha also got up to leave. But Prakasam asked them to have a cup of tea. He asked Aruna to make tea for the guests.

Prakasam was delighted that Aruna had turned down a request to write something for the magazine. In his happiness, he decided to entertain the guests. Aruna went into the kitchen to prepare tea hoping that they would leave as soon as they were finished.

"Aruna garu writes very well. I wish she had had time to write this article also." Kesavarao took the notes from Krishnamurthy.

"What is it about?" asked Prakasam quite casually for the sake of conversation.

"It's about that Sangamma rape case; remember the interview we conducted last Saturday?"

Prakasam was agitated.

"Did Aruna go with you on Saturday?"

"Yes. She was the one who took all these notes. It would have been wonderful if she could have written the article."

Prakasam didn't speak after that.

Aruna brought tea for everybody. After tea, the guests left.

Prakasam sat in the hall without saying anything. Aruna took the baby to bed and sang her to sleep. Prakasam was still sitting there when Aruna came into the hall. She sat in the chair opposite his and asked, "Why are you sitting like that?"

Prakasam stared at Aruna without saying anything.

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Chee. Don't talk to me." He got up and went into the bedroom.

"What's happened now?" She followed him.

Aruna had an inkling of what this was about.

"Aruna, why are you torturing me like this?"

She remained silent.

"I know where you went on Saturday."

"And what if you know?"

"What if I know? Really? If you aren't afraid, why did you have to lie to go there?"

"I didn't tell you the truth because I didn't want to argue with you. I knew you wouldn't let me go if I told you the truth."

"Chee. Don't you feel ashamed to talk like that?"

Aruna was enraged.

"Why should I be ashamed? You're the one who should be ashamed for creating a situation where I have no choice but to lie, and degrading me to the level where I did lie."

"Shut up."

"Yes. I will shut up. Don't talk to me anymore." Aruna walked away into the hall.

An awful silence blanketed the house again.

The next day Aruna went to the college. She asked Kesavarao to meet her in the library.

"Why did you have to tell him about everything? He hates our magazine. He didn't know anything about the interview with Sangamma."

Kesavarao panicked.

"I'm terribly sorry. I didn't know that. I couldn't

imagine that you wouldn't have told him about all this."

"If you didn't know, you should have kept quiet about it. Maybe you could have used your imagination a little. Are you telling your wife about these things?" she demanded in great agitation.

"In her case, it doesn't matter if I tell her or not. But I didn't think that you would do things against your husband's wishes. I don't know what to do now. Did this cause a lot of trouble for you?"

"It did. But tell me. You don't mind doing things whether your wife approves or not. But you think that I shouldn't do things if they're against my husband's wishes? What attitude is this?" Aruna was fed up with his hypocrisy.

"Generally, that's what happens," mumbled Kesavarao.

"He didn't like my going to the interview. It's turned out to be a big issue for him now. What shall I do?"

Kesavarao was perplexed.

"Maybe, you should stop doing all these things for the magazine."

"Stop?"

"Stop until he understands and agrees with your participation. Try to convince him."

"He will never agree."

"Then I don't see what can be done. Maybe it would be better for you to stop."

Aruna couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Should I simply stop after going through all these difficulties? If I had thought that you would give me advice like that, just because my husband doesn't approve of what I'm doing, I would never have joined in these activities in the first place."

Kesavarao suddenly hit on a bright idea.

"Next Sunday we'll all meet after you come back from Mehendi. We can talk about this then and decide what's best to do. I can't think of a better idea right now."

Aruna didn't say anything after that. Kesavarao left.

He didn't ask what had happened. He didn't ask how she was managing at home under so much stress. He didn't console her or extend any sympathy or support. She kept looking at him as he walked away.

8

Aruna was ready by nine o' clock on Sunday morning.

"Where are you going?" asked Prakasam very sternly.

"I am going to Mehendi."

"What?" Prakasam was astonished.

"Yes. We have to write about the conditions there in the magazine. I'm going to interview the women today."

"You... you're going to Mehendi?" Prakasam could not believe it.

"Yes." Aruna slipped her sandals on.

"Do you plan to come back to this house?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you go there today, or if you're planning to go to these meetings in the future, that will be the end of our marriage." Prakasam was red in face and sweating heavily.

"We'll talk about it in the evening." Aruna left.

It was clear to Aruna that living with Prakasam would be possible only if she stopped doing things that were important to her.

Should I live with him even when I can't love him?

Should I live with him just for the sake of protection and the baby?

What is the alternative?

She didn't have an answer.

Getting down from the bus at the Charminar stop, she saw Bharathi and Sujatha. The two girls had already met Krishnamurthy and Kesavarao the previous day and had gone to Mehendi to tell the women there that they would return the next day to interview them. The women were told that they could talk freely about their problems at the

time of the interview and that an article discussing the matter would be published in the magazine.

After walking for a few minutes, past the high court, the three women turned into a small side street. It didn't take long for Aruna to realise that they had entered the Mehendi area.

Women of all ages could be seen sitting in their doorways. Some were standing around the vendors' carts buying different things. Others were in small groups talking cheerfully. Some were beautifully dressed while others seemed tired and sleepy.

In one doorway, an elderly woman recognised Bharathi and Sujatha and invited them into her house. It was a small narrow room with a cot and a couple of chairs. On a third chair, a table fan hummed. Within five minutes, a few other middle aged women gathered there to see them. Ruksana, the elderly woman, asked someone to go and get three soft drinks for the visitors. Aruna felt awkward accepting the drink. These women, who had to sell their bodies for a living, had just spent ten Rupees to buy drinks for them. Though Aruna didn't want a drink, she felt that she might hurt the feelings of her host if she refused.

Aruna asked, "Why did you demonstrate in front of the police station?"

"We were demanding licenses," said Ruksana in Urdu.

The three knew some Urdu, so the conversation continued in Urdu. Initially, they didn't understand what the licenses were for.

"If we have licenses, the police won't torture us so much. This is our occupation. Whether it is right or wrong, this is what we do. I have been doing this for thirty years. If you insist that I stop now, how am I going to live? Tell me?"

"Are the police demanding that you stop?"

"Yes, they're telling us to vacate this area. They come everyday and beat us up. It doesn't matter what time of the day. They come in vans and take our people. Earlier we

used to give them twenty five Rupees a day per household and they left us alone. Now they just come into the houses whenever they please and take whatever they find. How can we live under these conditions? They drag our kids out even if they're hiding in the bathrooms. I think our lives would be better if we had licenses. We are told that people like us are given licenses in Bombay."

"Could you possibly leave this occupation and do something else if they show you a way out?"

They all tried to reply at once, their voices charged with emotion. Ruksana quietened them and spoke, "If they wanted to show us a way out, they wouldn't be treating us the way they do. They take the little bit of money we send to the girls thrown in jail. How are they going to show us the way? Where should we go from here? Would you let us come and live in your house? I don't want to talk about ourselves; our lives are ruined anyway, but what about our kids? We want our kids to get some education, but they won't admit our kids in school. We can't even send them to government schools; there they ask for the father's name. Whose name can we give? We can't go to a movie or anywhere else without people following us and making ugly comments. Do you think there's a way out for us? Do you think we can escape this torture? If we leave this will they leave us alone?"

Ruksana was too agitated to speak further.

Another woman picked up where Ruksana had left off.

"Let's say that we are dirty and despicable. How come everybody wants our money? For the Ganesh festival they want our money; for the Piir festival they want our money; for the two flag festivals they want our money; if we're so base, why do they want our money? When the minister came the other day they collected money from us to garland him. We have to give money during elections. They need us to rig the voting. We have to go and vote with a veil on at one time and without it at another. Sometimes

we have to vote ten times. Isn't all this despicable? Are we the only ones at fault? We're surviving in this dirt and filth. Can't they at least leave us alone?" She broke down and couldn't speak anymore.

They all kept looking at the visitors. There wasn't much expression on their faces. Some were in the back rooms getting dressed.

Aruna sat there quite perplexed. The three understood what was being said but didn't really know how to write it down. When Ruksana and the other woman spoke, their feelings seemed to pour out like a waterfall. Their emotional replies were almost poetic.

Ruksana started speaking again.

"They beat us up like animals. Not just in the police station, even here in our own homes. For some reason they want us to leave this place. I don't understand why they're concerned; the families in this neighbourhood are not complaining about us. On top of all that, we have to send girls to each and every policeman."

"If you get licenses, will the troubles with police end?"

"Maybe they won't end, but they might be less. Once they accept that this is our occupation, they can't beat us up like this. The money, of course, that they're taking from us even now."

There was no need to ask them any questions. Their pent up agony poured out.

When Aruna and the girls were about to leave, they bowed in gratitude. "Please help us in whatever way you can."

"I'm not sure we can help you. All we can do is write about your problems in the magazine," said Aruna.

"That's enough for us. It's quite an honour for us that such highly educated women came to our homes to listen to our problems," said Ruksana.

"Educated or not, we are all women. Police are like husbands to you, husbands are like police to us," said Aruna.

Everyone laughed.

"You told the truth. God bless you," said one woman.

On their way back Sujatha expressed her admiration of how clearly and openly the Mehandi women spoke. "We can't talk so openly about our problems," she added.

"Yes. There seemed to be no controls or inhibitions in their lives. They spoke about things quite honestly. Maybe it's the influence of their lifestyle," said Aruna.

By the time they reached Krishnamurthy's house, a few of their colleagues had already arrived. The rest arrived within fifteen minutes.

Aruna briefed them about their conversations at Mehandi.

Everyone remained silent for a couple of moments. Subbarao began to speak with some hesitation. "Aruna garu, Kesavarao told us about your situation yesterday. We talked about it at length last night."

Aruna felt uncomfortable but remained silent.

"Under the current conditions, it seems unfair for us to pressure you into working for the magazine. It would be better for you to stop now and resolve your problems first," said Krishnamurthy.

"It would be painful for me to see your life messed up because of this small magazine we circulate," said Ram-anarao.

"It's not good for the magazine either. People will say that it destroyed a family," said Kesavarao quite softly.

"True. I used to work in a student union during my younger days. We had two students, Kavitha and Ram-murthy, who were quite active in our union. They were in love and used to go together to the movies and picnics. But in all honesty, they were very good workers for the union. Still we had to ask them to leave because their going around without being married was bringing a bad name to the union. When we are building something, we must be careful not to attract any bad publicity," said Satyam, not quite knowing what he was saying.

"Hold on for a minute, I have something to say," said Aruna.

"Go ahead," said Krishnamurthy.

"From now on, I will not work for the magazine. Not because my husband doesn't like it, not because of what you have just said, but simply because I don't like working with you."

Aruna paused.

They all stared at her inquisitively.

"Why am I working for the magazine?"

Nobody said a word. Aruna continued.

"Not because Kesavarao pressured me into doing it or because I couldn't say 'no' to his request to participate. I just wanted to do it and felt it was my responsibility as a human being. I continued to do it because I liked it. And that was why I was willing to tolerate all the problems I faced. Did any of you realise that?"

"Aruna garu. We didn't say that you didn't like working for the magazine."

"You said that it wouldn't be fair to ask me to work for the magazine under these conditions. If you knew how passionately I felt about doing this work, you couldn't have said that. You obviously never have understood how involved I was in this work. Why did you ask for my participation in the first place? You wanted a woman to collect information on women's issues. You found me. You asked me for help. I went and did the work. It's all done now and you're happy. But did it occur to you to ask why I was doing this work? You thought you needed to have a woman working for the magazine, but you paid no heed to the attachment I developed for it. Otherwise you couldn't have advised me to stop so quickly. Do you yourselves know why you're working for the magazine? If you were really doing it with compassion, wouldn't you have understood my feelings by now?"

Kesavarao was about to say something.

Aruna waved him away.

"Wait. Let me finish. You said that if a woman has problems with her husband and separates from him, her whole life will be ruined. That gives me a hint about your culture. Kesavarao garu, tell me. You are afraid that the magazine will get a bad name because of me. What about the bad name I got among my colleagues because I talked to you everyday about the magazine? Why do you think I worked for it ignoring the gossip among my colleagues and the problems at home? If you still don't understand, you're hopelessly narrow-minded no matter how many magazines you publish. You couldn't understand a colleague who was working side by side with you. The moment she had a problem, you got scared. How can you expect to solve the problems of society with this attitude?"

Aruna got up, slipped her sandals on and walked out.

All that the group could do was to stare at her in disbelief as she left.

Sujatha and Bharathi followed her.

"Madam, we didn't know any of this before. We don't want to work for this magazine anymore," said Bharathi.

"Yes. I feel the same way," said Sujatha.

"Oh please, don't stop for my sake."

"I think it wouldn't be wrong to stop even if it were just for your sake. If the people there could not respect you, what is the chance that they would respect us? I don't think they care about our problems either," said Bharathi.

"Think about it carefully and do whatever you both feel is right. I have to go now."

"Madam, will you be home tomorrow? Can we come and see you?"

"No. I'm sorry, but I don't think so. I'm thinking of going to Delhi tonight."

"Delhi? Why Delhi?" Sujatha asked hesitantly.

"I'm going to stay with my friend. She's working there. I think I have no choice but to walk out of my house today."

Bharathi and Sujatha were saddened looking at Aruna's grief stricken face.

"We will also come. We will come to the station and see you off."

"Okay. Maybe you can do me a favour. Could you please go to the station and make a reservation for me? I'll go home and bring the baby."

They didn't know what to say. Aruna opened her purse and gave them money for the ticket.

"Oh, and one more thing. Let me give you my friend's address. Please send her a telegram. Tell her that I'm leaving today. And thank you so much for your help."

"You needn't say that, Madam." They took the address and the money and left.

Aruna had a sinking feeling in her heart as she reached her house. For three years she had been proud of her house. Soon it wouldn't be hers anymore. She felt choked with grief as she opened the front gate. But she restrained herself. It was no time to feel weak. Why should I feel so sad? I've learned a few truths about life. I've had some experiences. They will remain with me. I have to face life with courage, she counseled herself.

It would be impossible for her to forget the past and start a new life there with Prakasam. I did nothing wrong. I could not accept or even tolerate Prakasam controlling me. Prakasam has to recognise that he wronged me. If he's not concerned about losing me, why should I worry? When he recognizes his folly, he'll regret it. I have to think about my own life. I have to lead my life with courage, she told herself.

Aruna knocked on the door. Prakasam opened it.

"Why did you come? What have you decided?" he asked in a huff.

"I've come to take the baby."

"You want to take the baby? You think I'd give you the baby? Why do you even need her? You want to roam around and neglect her to death or what?"

"You won't give me the baby?" Aruna was astonished.

"Amma Aruna, This arguing is not good for the two of

you. At least for the sake of the baby you both have to be more tolerant." Kamalamma held Aruna's hands.

"Mother, you don't have to beg her. She's not so innocent that she doesn't recognise her faults. Her arrogance is..."

"Prakasam. Don't say anything more. Let's not call each other names. We know we can't live together in peace. Let's at least live in peace separately." Aruna went to the baby who was sleeping and picked her up.

Prakasam came behind her quickly, grabbed the baby, went into the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Aruna didn't know what to do. She felt a wave of weakness spreading all over the body. Her legs gave way and she collapsed. The prospect of leaving without the baby devastated her. It felt like somebody was tearing her heart out.

"Attayya. I am leaving. Please take care of the baby. I know you take care of her very well. I am the one who can't live without her." She could no longer restrain herself. Tears gushed out. She cried violently, like a crazed person.

She left the house alone and empty-handed—just as she had entered it three years ago.

'Three years ago I left my parents' home for Prakasam, for love, and for independence. Then, I felt very happy, courageous and enthusiastic. What happened between then and now? Now I don't have Prakasam, and I don't have love.'

'But I have freedom; freedom all around me in the endless expanse of the universe. What does freedom mean? Is there a goal for this freedom? How should a free person behave?'

'Is one life enough to find answers to these questions. What is the purpose of life? Is it to learn the meaning of freedom?'

'Life-freedom—are they two different entities? Aren't they one and the same?'

Aruna hoped to find answers to these questions with the help of her friend. She got on the train.

"Madam, please write to us after you reach Delhi," said Sujatha.

"Yes. I will," said Aruna with a feeble smile.

"When will you return, Madam?"

"I'll ask for a month's leave. After that I'll be back."

"Madam, when you come back, we'll join hands and do something. I'm sure work for a magazine isn't the only thing we can do. We'll bring together people like ourselves and try to really accomplish something," said Bharathi.

Aruna smiled. The train pulled away.

* * *

Uma gave Aruna a hug and teased her, "What did I do to suddenly deserve this kindness?"

"It's not kindness for you, but my need that brought me here" said Aruna, smiling feebly.

As soon as she saw the telegram, Uma had guessed that something had gone wrong. Now, looking at Aruna, it was evident that her guess was correct. Aruna looked frail and the pain and sorrow inflicted by the events of the last few days were reflected unmistakably on her face.

"Why didn't you bring the baby?" asked Uma after they got into the taxi. Aruna didn't speak. She just collapsed into Uma's lap and cried silently.

"Please Aruna, don't cry," said Uma trying to console her.

It was only after they reached home that Aruna could finally control her tears. Uma gave her a cup of coffee. Then Aruna took a shower while Uma prepared a snack for her. Exhausted and hungry, Aruna sat down and ate quietly.

"Now tell me what happened," said Uma, placing Aruna's head on her lap and stroking her hair gently.

"There isn't anything new. You've probably realised by now; I left because I could not live with Prakasam."

"That I understood. But what happened?"

"I wrote to you earlier that I was working for a magazine, and that Prakasam didn't like it. We had a lot of arguments about it. Prakasam said that we couldn't live together unless I stopped doing that work."

"Did you tell him you wouldn't stop?"

"I didn't say anything. In fact now I have given up working for the magazine."

"What is the problem then?"

"It is not just about the magazine Uma. I'll probably do other things that interest me. I just can't tolerate Prakasam trying to control me. I can't accept his dictating to me what I can do and what I can't. He thinks that my life should be restricted to him. I can't live like that. I want to be actively engaged with the world around me. I feel that society should benefit in at least some small way from my existence. Prakasam can't tolerate that."

"Then why did you stop working for the magazine?"

"The people there are worse than Prakasam."

"What do you mean?"

"The people running the magazine are all men. They believe that a woman should always accede to her husband's wishes. Their wives are all restricted to the bliss of their homes. When they need a woman to work for them, they find somebody like me. If my husband approves of my working for them, everything is fine. But if it creates problems, they advise me to leave the magazine and settle my family difficulties first. Otherwise, they believe my life will be ruined."

"Really?"

"That's what they advised me."

"Why did you work with them for so long then?"

"Because I didn't realise all this. They were using the magazine to expose injustices in the society. And they talked a lot about idealistic stuff. There are a couple of very intelligent people among them. So I thought it would be wonderful to work with them. But when they had to face

this issue, their true characters were revealed."

"Okay, Let's leave the magazine alone. Tell me about Prakasam. Can you live without him? Your love—"

"I don't love Prakasam." Aruna sat up abruptly and interrupted Uma.

Uma was astonished.

"I know you're very surprised, but I really don't love Prakasam."

"No, I'm not surprised, but it's clear to me that you're very angry with him." Uma smiled.

"Angry? Why should I be angry?"

"Because he turned out to be an obstacle to your freedom."

"When I look back, I realise that he never made any promises otherwise."

"What do you mean?"

"Uma, when I married him, I really didn't know much about him. I loved the fact that he loved me. I didn't know much else about him to love. I didn't know what he thought about life, and what he valued and what he didn't. I didn't know much about myself either, in the beginning. But slowly I realised what I want in my life and what gives me a sense of satisfaction. Now that I understand more about myself—I realise that there's a great gulf between us in our ideas and ideals, so should I still hold on to the illusion that I love him? Can I believe that I ever loved him?"

Aruna stopped talking. Uma didn't say anything. She kept looking at Aruna's face, as if trying to determine how much truth and how much anger there were in Aruna's words.

"Do you remember, you laughed at me when I said I was going to marry for the sake of freedom. Now I understand why you laughed."

"That day I wasn't being very serious when I said that."

"I didn't take it very seriously either. But honestly, I didn't understand the meaning of freedom then. I was

constantly unhappy that my parents didn't let me go to movies or go out with friends. My definition of freedom then was to be free to wear the saree I liked, to go to the movies I liked, to go out with friends and generally, not to always require someone's approval to do those things. That was all. I thought marrying Prakasam would liberate me. In fact it did. The only vague concern I had was that I might be caught up in housework and raising children and lose some of the excitement of life. I talked about that with Prakasam. But now, I understand better what freedom actually means. I understand why I need it and I understand its value. Freedom is not something one can acquire easily just by leaving one house and going to another."

"That's why Sudhir and I are living separately, and haven't got married. This way there's no question of one of us obstructing the other or having to consult the other in personal matters."

"Do you think that's the right solution, Uma?"

"What do you think?" asked Uma curiously.

"To me it looks like avoiding the problem rather than solving it. Let's not worry about the marriage ritual itself. I don't have much faith in that anyway. But isn't it cowardly to love someone and avoid living together with him for fear that you might obstruct one another's freedom? Doesn't that reveal a lack of confidence in each other?" Aruna said that with hesitation, wondering if she had hurt Uma's feelings.

"Does it look like that to you?" asked Uma, thinking about it herself.

"When you wrote to me about this, I thought about you a lot. Sometimes I thought your decision was very good. But I also felt that there was a deficiency somewhere in this arrangement. I know that marriage might restrict the freedom of both of you. I also understand that both of you need to have your freedom. But you are living separately for fear that problems may crop up if you live

together. Isn't it better to live together and respect one another's freedom?"

"Aruna, it's a wonderful ideal to live together and respect each other's independence. But it doesn't work in real life. Our lives don't simply depend on our own thoughts and our own ideals. And besides, our lives are not completely our own either. The society around us has a great influence on our lives. A small problem can arise somewhere quite outside our control. It's to avoid such things that Sudhir and I are living like this. We don't really like this arrangement either. We'll start to live together when we feel that we don't want to continue like this."

Both remained absorbed in their own thoughts for a while. Suddenly Uma asked, "If it weren't for your need for engagement with society-at-large, wouldn't you say Prakasam is a good man and couldn't you see the possibility of living with him without serious problems?"

Aruna didn't speak for a while. She thought about it for a while and spoke slowly as if she were not only answering Uma's question, but also trying to convince herself. "True. If I didn't need to interact with society and Prakasam were the only thing in my world, he is a good person; better than most men. I could even have compromised on little things here and there—" Aruna paused there for a moment as if she didn't like this train of thought.

She spoke again. "But Uma, however good a man is, it seems he can't help trying to control the woman. Prakasam started making decisions for me within two months of our marriage. He refused to let me have an abortion. I lost the right to make a decision concerning my own body. Depending on the level of our own awareness, we tolerate different levels of control by men. Unless we have a sense of our own individuality, we don't understand the degree to which our lives are controlled by them. We all struggle in our own ways to get out from under this fist that controls us. I left Prakasam. You found a new way of living

with Sudhir without marrying him. Others are choosing to remain single. Some even take their own lives when the control becomes unbearable. Each in our own way, we all yearn and struggle for our own identities."

They talked late into the night, trying to understand how their personal experiences related to the conditions faced by women in general. It wasn't until the early hours of the morning that they finally fell asleep.

By the time Aruna woke up it was eight o' clock. It looked like Uma had already gone out. Aruna made a cup of tea for herself and was sitting at Uma's desk looking at the books when she found a note. Uma had scribbled it for her.

"Aruna, I'm going to the station to make reservations for us to go to Agra and Bharatpur. I'll also go and see Sudhir to tell him about our plans. Tomorrow all three of us will go either to Bharatpur or Agra. Eat some bread for breakfast and, if you have the energy, do some cooking. I'll be back soon. —Uma"

Aruna sat there thinking about Uma. 'She's trying to cheer me up with these trips. With Uma's help I should try to rejuvenate myself before I go back to Hyderabad. I guess I will. But what about the baby?'

'My lovely anklet bell, my beautiful star, What could she be doing now? Maybe she's asking for me? Maybe she's sad and looking for me.' Aruna was distraught. She sat there, unable to think of anything but the baby, till Uma walked in.

"I brought tickets for Agra for tomorrow. We can go to Bharatpur after a couple of days. What do you say?" said Uma with a smile.

Aruna didn't say anything. Uma could see that Aruna had been crying. She felt so sorry for her. Pulling Aruna closer to herself and stroking her hair gently, Uma asked, "Are you all right?"

"I miss the baby." Aruna hid her face in Uma's chest and sobbed.

"Please don't... just imagine that you came here for a month to take care of some work. Weren't you away from the baby for a week when you went to Bangalore? Think of it just like that. And when you go back to Hyderabad, you can go and get the baby."

"You think he'll give her to me?"

Uma noticed the fear and uneasiness in Aruna's eyes, a person who is otherwise never afraid.

"Would you keep quiet if he didn't? You have a right to keep her with you at least until she's nine. Ask him nicely. If it doesn't work, take him to court."

"I don't know, Uma. When I think of the baby, I feel like giving up all my thoughts and going back to that house. I can't live without her." She couldn't stop crying.

"And you won't have to. Why do you have to live without her? She'll come to live with you. Don't worry. You should be courageous and calm. Come on, get up."

Aruna collected herself and remained silent.

After a while she asked meekly, "After nine years, I lose my rights to the baby?"

"Let's not worry about that now. Do you think once the baby has been with you for nine years she will be able to leave you? I don't think so." Uma tried to cheer her up.

"Prakasam also loves the baby very much."

"Okay, you both love her. When the baby grows up a little, she'll decide herself where she wants to live. You won't deny her that choice, will you?"

And she said again, "But what about you? What do you want to do? It doesn't look to me like you would be content merely with your college job."

"I'll do something."

"What do you mean-something?"

"I don't know yet. But Uma, there are so many things to do if we really want to. After seeing Sangamma and after witnessing the problems of the Mehandi women, I realised that there is a lot that needs to be done. It would be very satisfying to file charges against Sangamma's

abusers and bring them before the court. It would be satisfying to help the Mehendi women get licenses. And many other such things. One lifetime might not be enough to accomplish some of these things. But we women must do whatever we can to help other women. I'll find something to do. I strongly believe that I should do whatever I can. If we do nothing for the freedom of fellow women, our own freedom is meaningless. For some reason Uma, I'm more conscious today than ever before that I am a woman. As I grow older, and as I learn from my own experiences and from observing society around me, I am constantly reminded of that fact."

"What can you do on your own?" Uma wasn't sure whether Aruna was talking emotionally or whether she was thinking about these things in practical terms.

"Sujatha and Bharathi are there. I'm sure there are more women out there like me. I'll do whatever I can."

"But are your actions going to make a significant difference? Let's say that Sangamma's abusers are punished. Would that put an end to rapes? Say that the Mehendi women get licenses. They're giving licenses in Bombay right now. Would that by itself improve their lives? When the society all around us is so rotten, will a little bit of effort from you make any difference? How long do you think it will take for society to change?"

"Just because I can't change the whole society, should I give up doing whatever I can? I have realised that I can't live without doing my bit. I'll do my best and prove myself. My work will give me satisfaction—the satisfaction that my life has meaning. Isn't that what freedom is all about? If all I cared about was my own life, then I wouldn't need this freedom. My freedom should have meaning. Right now, finding that meaning is my goal."

Uma kept looking at the bright sparkling eyes in the tired face of her friend.